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MY CONTEMPORARIES IN FICTION

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MY CONTEMPORARIES IN FICTION

BY

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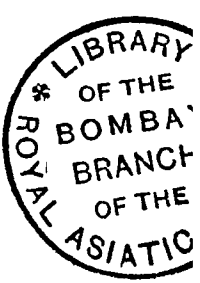

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INTRODUCTORY

WHEN these essays were originally printed (they appeared simultaneously in many newspapers), I expected to make some enemies. So far, I have been most agreeably disappointed in that regard; but I can affirm that they have made me many friends, and that I have had encouragement enough from fellow craftsmen, from professional critics, and from casual readers at home, in the colonies, and the United States to bolster up the courage of the most timorous man that ever held a pen. As a set-off against all this, I have received one very noble and dignified rebuke from a Contemporary in Fiction, whom the world holds in high honour, who regrets that

I am not engaged in creative work—in lieu of this—and pleads that 'authorship should be allowed the distinction of an exemption from rank and title.' With genuine respect I venture to urge that this is an impossible aspiration, and in spite of the lofty sanction which the writer's name must lend to his opinion, I have been unable to surrender the belief that the work done in these pages is alike honourable and useful. It is, as will be seen, in the nature of a crusade against puffery and hysteria. It is not meant to instruct the instructed, and it makes no pretence to be infallible, but it is issued in its present form in the belief that it will (in some degree) aid the average reader in the formation of just opinions on contemporary art, and in the hope that it may (in some degree) impose a check on certain interested or over-enthusiastic people.

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MY CONTEMPORARIES IN FICTION

I

FIRST, THE CRITICS, AND THEN A WORD ON DICKENS

THE critics of to-day are suffering from a sort of epidemic of kindness. They have accustomed themselves to the administration of praise in unmeasured doses. They are not, taking them in the mass, critics any longer, but merely professional admirers. They have ceased to be useful to the public, and are becoming dangerous to the interests of letters. In their over-friendly eyes every painstaking apprentice in the art of fiction is a master, and hysterical schoolgirls, who have spent their brief day in the acquisition of ignorance, are reviewed as if they were so

many Elizabeth Barrett Brownings or George Eliots. One of the most curious and instructive things in this regard is the use which the modern critic makes of Sir Walter Scott. Sir Walter is set up as a sort of first standard for the aspirant in the art of fiction to excel. Let the question be asked, with as much gravity as is possible: What *is* the use of a critic who gravely assures us that Mr. S. R. Crockett 'has rivalled, if not surpassed, Sir Walter'? The statement is, of course, most lamentably and ludicrously absurd, but it is made more than once, or twice, or thrice, and it is quoted and advertised. It is not Mr. Crockett's fault that he is set on this ridiculous eminence, and his name is not cited here with any grain of malice. He has his fellow-sufferers. Other gentlemen who have 'rivalled, if not surpassed, Sir Walter,' are Dr. Conan Doyle, Mr. J. M. Barrie, Mr. Ian Maclaren, and Mr. Stanley Weyman. No person whose judgment is worth a straw can read the writings of these accomplished workmen without respect and pleasure. But it is no

more true that they rival Sir Walter than it is true that they are twelve feet high, or that any one of them believes in his own private mind the egregious announcement of the reviewer. The one great sufferer by this craze for setting men of middling stature side by side with Scott is our beautiful and beloved Stevenson, who, unless rescued by some judicious hand, is likely to be buried under foolish and unmeasured praises.

It would be easy to fill pages with verifications of the charge here made. Books of the last half-dozen years or so, which have already proved the ephemeral nature of their own claim, have been received with plaudits which would have been exaggerated if applied to some of our acknowledged classics. The critical declaration that 'Eric Bright-eyes' could have been written by no other Englishman of the last six hundred years than Mr. Rider Haggard may be allowed its own monumental place in the desert of silly and hysteric judgments.

It is time, for the sake of mere common-sense, to get back to something like a real

standard of excellence. It is time to say plainly that our literature is in danger of degradation, and that the mass of readers is systematically misled.

Before I go further, I will offer one word in self-excuse. I have taken this work upon my own shoulders, because I cannot see that anybody else will take it, and because it seems to me to be calling loudly to be done. My one unwillingness to undertake it lies in the fact that I have devoted my own life to the pursuit of that art the exercise of which by my contemporaries I am now about to criticise. That has an evil and ungenerous look. But, whatever the declaration may seem to be worth, I make it with sincerity and truth. I have never tasted the gall of envy in my life. I have had my share, and my full share, of the critical sugarplums. I have never, in the critics' apprehension, 'rivalled or surpassed Sir Walter,' but on many thousands of printed pages (of advertisement) it is recorded that I have 'more genius for the delineation of rustic character than any half-dozen surviving novelists put

together.' I laugh when I read this, for I remember Thomas Hardy, who is my master far and far away. I am quite persuaded that my critic was genuinely pleased with the book over which he thus 'pyrotechnicated' (as poor Artemus used to say), but I think my judgment the more sane and sober of the two. I have not the faintest desire to pull down other men's flags and leave my own flag flying. And there is the first and last intrusion of myself. I felt it necessary, and I will neither erase it nor apologise for its presence.

Side by side with the exaggerated admiration with which our professional censors greet the crowd of new-comers, it is instructive to note the contempt into which some of our old gods have fallen. The Superior Person we have always with us. He is, in his essence, a Prig; but when, as occasionally happens, his heart and intelligence ripen, he loses the characteristics which once made him a superior person. Whilst he holds his native status his special art is not to admire anything which common people find admir-

able. A year or two ago it became the shibboleth of his class that they couldn't read Dickens. We met suddenly a host of people who really couldn't stand Dickens. Most of them (of course) were 'the people of whom crowds are made,' owning no sort of mental furniture worth exchange or purchase. They killed the fashion of despising Dickens *as* a fashion, and the Superior Person, finding that his sorrowful inability was no longer an exclusive thing, ceased to brag about it. When a fashion in dress is popular on Hampstead Heath on Bank Holiday festivals, the people who originally set the fashion discard it, and set another. In half a generation some of our superiors, for the mere sake of originality in judgment, will be going back to the pages of that immortal master—immortal as men count literary immortality—and will begin to tell us that after all there was really something in him.

It was Mr. W. D. Howells, an American writer of distinguished ability, as times go, who set afloat the phrase that since the death of Thackeray and Dickens fiction has

become a finer art. If Mr. Howells had meant what many people supposed him to mean, the saying would have been merely impudent. He used the word 'finer' in its literal sense, and meant only that a fashion of minuteness in investigation and in style had come upon us. There is a sense in which the dissector who makes a reticulation of the muscular and nervous systems of a little finger is a 'finer' surgeon than the giant of the hospitals whose diagnosis is an inspiration, and whose knife carves unerringly to the root of disease. There is a sense in which a sculptor, carving on cherry-stones likenesses of commonplace people, would be a 'finer' artist than Michael Angelo, whose custom it was to handle forms of splendour on an heroic scale of size. In that sense, and in the hands of some of its practitioners, fiction for a year or two became a finer art than it had ever been before. But the microscopist was never popular, and could never hope to be. He is dead now, and the younger men are giving us vigorous copies of Dumas, and Scott, and

Edgar Allan Poe, and some of them are fusing the methods of Dickens with those of later and earlier writers. We are in for an era of broad effect again.

But a great many people, and, amongst them, some who ought to have known better, adopted the saying of Mr. Howells in a wider sense than he ever intended it to carry, and, partly as a result of this, we have arrived at a certain tacit depreciation of the greatest emotional master of fiction. There are other and more cogent reasons for the temporary obscuration of that brilliant light. It may aid our present purpose to discover what they are.

Every age has its fashions in literature as it has in dress. All the beautiful fashions in literature, at least, have been thought worthy of revival and imitation, but there has come to each in turn a moment when it has begun to pall upon the fancy. Every school before its death is fated to inspire satiety and weariness. The more overwhelming its success has been, the more complete and sweeping is the welcomed

change. We know how the world thrilled and wept over Pamela and Clarissa, and we know how their particular form of pathos sated the world and died. We know what a turn enchanted castles had, and how their spell withered into nothing. We know what a triumphal progress the Sentimental Sufferer made through the world, and what a bore he came to be. It is success which kills. Success breeds imitation, and the imitators are a weariness. And it is not the genius who dies: It is only the school which arose to mimic him. Richardson is alive for everybody but the dull and stupid. Now that the world of fiction is no longer crowded with enchanted castles, we can go to live in one occasionally for a change, and enjoy ourselves. Werther is our friend again, though the school he founded was probably the most tiresome the world has seen.

Now, with the solitary exception of Sir Walter Scott, it is probable that no man ever inspired such a host of imitators as Charles Dickens. There is not a writer of fiction at this hour, in any land where fiction

is a recognised trade or art, who is not, whether he knows it and owns it, or no, largely influenced by Dickens. His method has got into the atmosphere of fiction, as that of all really great writers must do, and we might as well swear to unmix our oxygen and hydrogen as to stand clear of his influences. To stand clear of those influences you must stand apart from all modern thought and sentiment. You must have read nothing that has been written in the last sixty years, and you must have been bred on a desert island. Dickens has a living part in the life of the whole wide world. He is on a hundred thousand magisterial benches every day. There is not a hospital patient in any country who has not at this minute a right to thank God that Dickens lived. What his blessed and bountiful hand has done for the poor and oppressed, and them that had no helper, no man knows. He made charity and good feeling a religion. Millions and millions of money have flowed from the coffers of the rich for the benefit of the poor because of

his books. A great part of our daily life, and a good deal of the best of it, is of his making.

No single man ever made such opportunities for himself. No single man was ever so widely and permanently useful. No single man ever sowed gentleness and mercy with so broad a sweep.

This is all true, and very far from new, but it has not been the fashion to say it lately. It is not the whole of the truth. Noble rivers have their own natural defects of swamp and mudbank. Sometimes his tides ran sluggishly, as in 'The Battle of Life,' for example, which has always seemed to me, at least, a most mawkish and unreal book. The pure stream of 'The Carol,' which washes the heart of a man, runs thin in 'The Chimes,' runs thinner in 'The Haunted Man,' and in 'The Battle of Life' is lees and mud. 'Nickleby,' again, is a young man's book, and as full of blemishes as of genius. But when all is said and done, it killed the Yorkshire schools.

The chief fault the superficial modern

critic has to find with Dickens is a sort of rumbustious boisterousness in the expression of emotion. But let one thing be pointed out, and let me point it out in my own fashion. Tom Hood, who was a true poet, and the best of our English wits, and probably as good a judge of good work as any person now alive, went home after meeting with Dickens, and in a playful enthusiasm told his wife to cut off his hand and bottle it, because it had shaken hands with Boz. Lord Jeffrey, who was cold as a critic, cried over little Nell. So did Sydney Smith, who was very far from being a blubbering sentimentalist. To judge rightly of any kind of dish you must bring an appetite to it. Here is the famous Dickens pie, when first served, pronounced inimitable, not by a class or a clique, but by all men in all lands. But you get it served hot, and you get it served cold, it is rehashed in every literary restaurant, you detect its flavour in your morning leader and your weekly review. The pie gravy finds its way into the prose and the verse of a whole young generation. It has

a striking flavour, an individual flavour. It gets into everything. We are weary of the ceaseless resurrections of that once so toothsome dish. Take it away.

The original pie is no worse and no better, but thousands of cooks have had the recipe for it, and have tried to make it. Appetite may have vanished, but the pie was a good pie.

No simile runs on all fours, and this parable in a pie-dish is a poor traveller.

But this principle of judgment applies of necessity to all great work in art. It does not apply to merely good work, for that is nearly always imitative, and therefore not much provocative of imitation. It happens sometimes that an imitator, to the undiscerning reader, may even seem better than the man he mimics, because he has a modern touch. But remember, in his time the master also was a modern.

The new man says of Dickens that his sentiment rings false. This is a mistake. It rings old-fashioned. No false note ever moved a world, and the world combined to

love his very name. There were tears in thousands of households when he died, and they were as sincere and as real as if they had arisen at the loss of a personal friend.

We, who in spite of fashion remain true to our allegiance to the magician of our youth, who can never worship or love another as we loved and worshipped him, are quite contented in the slight inevitable dimming of his fame. He is still in the hearts of the people, and there he has only one rival.

No attempt at a review of modern fiction can be made without a mention of the men who were greatest when the art was great When we have done with the giants we will come down to the big fellows, and by that time we shall have an eye for the proportions of the rest. But before we part for the time being, let me offer the uncritical reader one valuable touchstone. Let him recall the stories he has read, say, five years ago. If he can find a live man or woman anywhere amongst his memories, who is still as a friend or an enemy to him, he has,

fifty to one, read a sterling book. Dickens' people stand this test with all readers, whether they admire him or no. Even when they are grotesque they are alive. They live in the memory even of the careless like real people. And this is the one unfailing trial by which great fiction may be known.

II

CHARLES READE

READE's position in literature is distinctly strange. The professional critics never came within miles of a just appreciation of his greatness, and the average 'cultured reader' receives his name with a droll air of allowance and patronage. But there are some, and these are not the least qualified as judges, who regard him as ranking with the great masters. You will find, I think, that the men holding this opinion are, in the main, fellow-workers in the craft he practised. His warmest and most constant admirers are his brother novelists. Trollope, to be sure, spoke of him as 'almost a man of genius,' but Trollope's mind was a quintessential distillation of the commonplace, and the man who was on fire with the romance and passion of his own age

was outside the limit of his understanding. But amongst the writers of English fiction whom it has been my privilege to know personally, I have not met with one who has not reckoned Charles Reade a giant.

The critics have never acknowledged him, and, in a measure, he has been neglected by the public. There is a reason for everything, if we could only find it, and sometimes I seem to have a glimmering of light on this perplexing problem. Sir Walter Besant (Mr. Besant then) wrote in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' years ago a daring panegyric on Reade's work, giving him frankly a place among the very greatest. My heart glowed as I read, but I know now that it took courage of the rarer sort to express a judgment so unreserved in favour of a writer who never for an hour occupied in the face of the public such a position as is held by three or four men in our day, whom this dead master could have rolled in the hollow of his hand.

Let me try for a minute or two to show why and how he is so very great a man;

and then let me try to point out one or two of the reasons for which the true reward of greatness has been denied him.

The very first essential to greatness in any pursuit is that a man should be in earnest in respect to it. You may as well try to kindle your household fire with pump water as to excite laughter by the invention of a story which does not seem laughable to yourself, or to draw real tears by a story conceived whilst your own heart is dry. 'The wounded is the wounding heart.' In Charles Reade's case this essential sympathy amounted to a passion. He derided difficulties, but he derided them after the fashion of the thorough-going enthusiast, and not after that of the sluggard. He made up his mind to write fiction, and he practised for years before he printed a line. He assured himself of methods of selection and of forms of expression. Better equipped by nature than one in a hundred of those who follow the profession he had chosen, he laboured with a fiery, unresting patience to complete his armoury, and to perfect

himself in the handling of its every weapon. He read omnivorously, and, throughout his literary lifetime, he made it his business to collect and to collate, to classify and to catalogue, innumerable fragments of character, of history, of current news, of evanescent yet vital stuffs of all sorts. In the last year but one of his life he went with me over some of the stupendous volumes he had built in this way. The vast books remain as an illustration of his industry, but only one who has seen him in consultation with their pages can guess the accuracy and intimacy of his knowledge of their contents. They seem to deal with everything, and with whatever they enclosed he was familiar.

This encyclopædic industry would have left a commonplace man commonplace, and in the estimate of a great man's genius it takes rank merely as a characteristic. His sympathy for his chosen craft was backed by a sympathy for humanity just as intense and impassioned. He was a glorious lover and hater of lovable and hateful things.

In one respect he was almost unique amongst men, for he united a savage detestation of wrong with a most minute accuracy in his judgment of its extent and quality. He laboured in the investigation of the problems of his own age with the cold diligence of an antiquary. He came to a conclusion with the calm of a great judge. And when his cause was sure he threw himself upon it with an extraordinary and sustained energy. The rage of his advocacy is in surprising contrast with the patience exerted in building up his case.

Reade had a poet's recognition for the greatness of his own time. He saw the epic nature of the events of his own hour, the epic character of the men who moulded those events. Hundreds of years hence, when federated Australia is thickly sown with great cities, and the island-continent has grown to its fulness of accomplished nationhood, and is grey in honour, Reade's nervous English, which may by that time have grown quaint, and only legible to learned eyes, will preserve the history of

its beginnings. That part of his work, indeed, is purely and wholly epic in sentiment and discernment, however colloquial in form, and it is the sole example of its kind, since it was written by one who was contemporary with the events described.

Reade was pretty constantly at war with his critics, but he fairly justified himself of the reviewer in his own day, and at this time the people who assailed him have something like a right to sleep in peace. In private life one of the most amiable of men, and distinguished for courtesy and kindness, he was a swash-buckler in controversy. He had a trick of being in the right which his opponents found displeasing, and he was sometimes cruel in his impatience of stupidity and wrong-headedness. Scarcely any continuance in folly could have inspired most men to the retorts he occasionally made. He wrote to one unfortunate: 'Sir,—You have ventured to contradict me on a question with regard to which I am profoundly learned, where you are ignorant as dirt.' It was quite true,

but another kind of man would have found another way of saying it.

That trick of being right came out with marked effect in the discussion which accompanied the issue of 'Hard Cash' in 'All the Year Round.' A practitioner in lunacy condemned one of the author's statements as a bald impossibility. Reade answered that 'the impossibility in question disguised itself as fact, and went through the hollow form of taking place' on such and such a date in such and such a public court, and was recorded in such and such contemporary journals. Whenever he made a crusade against a public evil, as when he assailed the prison system, or the madhouse system, or the system of rattening in trades unions, his case was supported by huge collections of indexed fact, and in the fight which commonly followed he could appeal to unimpeachable records; but again and again the angry fervour of the advocate led people to forget or to distrust the judicial accuracy on which his case invariably rested.

When all is said and done, his claim to

immortality lies less in the books which deal with the splendours and the scandals of his own age than in that monument of learning, of humour, of pathos, and of narrative skill, 'The Cloister and the Hearth.'[1] It is not too much to say of this book that, on its own lines, it is without a rival. To the reader it seems to be not less than the revival of a dead age. To assert dogmatically that the bygone people with whom it deals could not have been other than it paints them would be to pretend to a knowledge greater than the writer's own. But they are not the men and women with whom we are familiar in real life, and they are not the men and women with whom other writers of fiction have made us acquainted. Yet they are indubitably human and alive, and we doubt them no more than the people with whom we rub shoulders in the street. Dr. Conan Doyle once said to me what I

[1] It is worth while to record here a phrase used by Charles Reade to me in reference to this work. He was rebutting the charge of plagiarism which had been brought against him, and he said laughingly, 'It is true that I milked three hundred cows into my bucket, but the butter I churned was my own.'

thought a memorable thing about this book. To read it, he said, was 'like going through the Dark Ages with a dark lantern.' It is so, indeed. You pass along the devious route from old Sevenbergen to mediæval Rome, and wherever the narrative leads you, the searchlight flashes on everything, and out of the darkness and the dust and death of centuries life leaps at you. And I know nothing in English prose which for a noble and simple eloquence surpasses the opening and the closing paragraphs of this great work, nor—with some naïve and almost childish passages of humour omitted—a richer, terser, purer, or more perfect style than that of the whole narrative. Nowadays, the fashion in criticism has changed, and the feeblest duffer amongst us receives welcome ten times more enthusiastic and praise less measured than was bestowed upon 'The Cloister and the Hearth' when it first saw the light. Think only for a moment—think what would happen if such a book should suddenly be launched upon us. Honestly, there *could*

be no reviewing it. Our superlatives have been used so often to describe, at the best, good, plain, sound work, and, at the worst, frank rubbish, that we have no vocabulary for excellence of such a cast.

And now, how comes it that with genius, scholarship, and style, with laughter and terror and tears at his order, this great writer halts in his stride towards the place which should be his by right? It seems to me at times as if I had a partial answer to that question. I believe that a judicious editor, without a solitary act of impiety, could give Charles Reade undisputed and indisputable rank. One-half the whole business is a question of printing. This great and admirable writer had one constant fault, which is so vulgar and trivial that it remains as much of a wonder as it is of an offence. He seeks emphasis by the expedient of big type and small type, of capitals and small capitals, of italics and black letter, and of tawdry little illustrations. Long before the reader arrives at the point at which it is intended that his emotions shall be stirred,

his eye warns him that the shock is coming. He knows beforehand that the rhetorical bolt is to fall just there, and when it comes it is ten to one that he finds the effect disappointing. Or the change from the uniformity of the page draws his eye to the 'displayed' passages, and he is tantalised into reading them out of their proper place and order. Take, for instance, an example which just occurs to me. In 'It is Never Too Late to Mend,' Fielding and Robinson are lost in an Australian forest—'bushed,' as the local phrase goes. At that hour they are being hunted for their lives. They fall into a sort of devil's circle, and, as lost men have often done, they come in the course of their wanderings upon their own trail. For awhile they follow it in the hope that it will lead them to some camp or settlement. Suddenly Fielding becomes aware that they are following the track of their own earlier footprints, and almost in the same breath he discovers that these are joined by the traces of other feet. He reads a fatal and true meaning into this sign, looks

to his weapons, and starts off at a mended pace. 'What are you doing?' asks Robinson, and Fielding answers (in capital letters): 'I am hunting the hunters!' The situation is admirably dramatic. Chance has so ordered it that the pursued are actually behind the pursuers, and the presence of the intended murderers is proclaimed by a device which is at once simple, natural, novel, and surprising. All the elements for success in thrilling narrative are here, and the style never lulls for a second, or for a second allows the strain of the position to relax. But those capital letters have long since called the eye of the reader to themselves, and the point the writer tries to emphasise is doubly lost. It has been forestalled, and has become an irritation. You come on it twice; you have been robbed of anticipation and suspense, which, just here, are the life and soul of art. You know before you ought to be allowed to guess; and, worst of all, perhaps, you feel that your own intelligence has been affronted. Surely you had imagination enough to feel the signi-

ficance of the line without this meretricious trick to aid you. It is not the business of a great master in fiction to jog the elbow of the unimaginative, and to say, 'Wake up at this,' or 'Here it is your duty to the narrative to experience a thrill.'

Another and an equally characteristic fault, though of far less frequent occurrence, is Reade's fashion of intruding himself upon his reader. He stands, in a curiously irritating way, between the picture he has painted and the man he has invited to look at it. In one instance he drags the eye down to a footnote in order that you may read: 'I, C. R., say this'—which is very little more or less than an impertinence. The sense of humour which probably twinkled in the writer's mind is faint at the best. We know that he, C. R., said that. We are giving of our time and intelligence to C. R., and we are rather sorry than otherwise to find him indulging in this small buffoonery.

It should, I think, be an instruction to future publishers of Charles Reade to give him Christian printing—to confine him in

the body of his narrative to one fount of type, and rigorously to deny him the use (except in their accustomed and orthodox places) of capitals, small capitals, and italics. And I cannot think that any irreverence could be charged against an editor who had the courage to put a moist pen through those expressions of egotism and naïve self-satisfaction and vanity which do occasionally disfigure his pages.

I ask myself if these trifles—for in comparison with the sum of Reade's genius they are small things indeed—can in any reasonable measure account for the neglect which undoubtedly besets him. In narrative vigour he has but one rival—Dumas *père*—and he is far and away the master of that rival in everything but energy. No male writer surpasses him in the knowledge of feminine human nature. There is no love-making in literature to beat the story of the courtship of Julia Dodd and Alfred Hardy in 'Hard Cash.' In mere descriptive power he ranks with the giants. Witness the mill on fire in 'The Cloister and the Hearth'; the lark in

exile in 'Never too Late to Mend'; the boat-race in 'Hard Cash'; the scene of Kate Peyton at the firelit window, and Griffith in the snow, in 'Griffith Gaunt.' There are a thousand bursts of laughter in his pages, not mere sniggers, but lung-shaking laughters, and the man who can go by any one of a hundred pathetic passages without tears is a man to be pitied. Let it be admitted that at times he wrenches his English rather fiercely, and yet let it be said that for delicacy, strength, sincerity, clarity, and all great graces of style, he is side by side with the noblest of our prose writers. Can it be that a few scattered drops of vulgarity in emphasis dim such a fire as this? Does so small a dead fly taint so big a pot of ointment? I will not be foolish enough to dogmatise on such a point, and yet I can find no other reasons than those I have already given why a master-craftsman should not hold a master-craftsman's place. Solomon has told us what 'a little folly' can do for 'him who is in reputation for wisdom.' The great mass of the public can always tell what pleases it,

but it cannot always tell why it is pleased. And the man who writes for wide and lasting fame has to depend, not upon the verdict of the expert and the cultured, but on the love of those who only know they love, and who have no power to give the critical why and wherefore. The public—'the stupid and ignorant pig of a public,' as 'Pococurante' called it years ago—is always being abused, and yet it is only the public which, in the end, can tell us if we have done well or ill. We have all to consent to be measured by it, and, in the long run, it estimates our stature with a perfect accuracy.

I hope I may not be thought impertinent in intruding here a reminiscence of Reade which seems characteristic of his sweeter side. In reading over these pages for the press I have been moved to a mournful and tender remembrance of the only one of the three great Vanished Masters whom it was my happy chance to meet in the flesh. I dedicated to him the second novel which left my pen—the third to reach the public—and in sending him the volumes on the day of issue I wrote what I remember as a rather boyish letter, in which I was at no pains to disguise my admiration for his genius. That admiration was not then tempered by the considerations which are expressed above, for they touched me only after many years of practice in the art he adorned so richly. He answered with a gentle and sad courtesy, and concluded with these words: 'It is no discredit in a young man to esteem a senior beyond his merits.' I have always thought that very graceful and felicitous, and now that I am myself grown to be a senior I am more persuaded of its charm than ever.

III

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

In the scheme of this series, as originally announced, Thackeray's work should have formed the subject of the third chapter. But, on reflection, I have decided that, considering my present purpose, it would be little more than a useless self-indulgence to do what I at first intended. There is no sort of dispute about Thackeray. There is no need for any revision of the general opinion concerning him. It would be to me, personally, a delightful thing to write such an appreciation as I had in mind, but this is not the place for it.

Let us pass, then, at once to the consideration of the incomplete and arrested labours of the charming and accomplished workman whose loss all lovers of English literature are still lamenting.

I have special and private reasons for

thinking warmly of Robert Louis Stevenson, the man; and these reasons seem to give me some added warrant for an attempt to do justice to Robert Louis Stevenson, the writer. With the solitary exception of the unfortunate cancelled letters from Samoa, which were written whilst he was in ill-health, and suffered a complete momentary eclipse of style, he has scarcely published a line which may not afford the most captious reader pleasure. With that sole exception he was always an artist in his work, and always showed himself alive to the finger-tips. He was in constant conscious search of felicities in expression, and his taste was exquisitely just. His discernment in the use of words kept equal pace with his invention —he knew at once how to be fastidious and daring. It is to be doubted if any writer has laboured with more constancy to enrich and harden the texture of his style, and at the last a page of his was like cloth of gold for purity and solidity.

This is the praise which the future critics of English literature will award him. But in

this age of critical hysteria it is not enough to yield a man the palm for his own qualities. With regard to Stevenson our professional guides have gone fairly demented, and it is worth while to make an effort to give him the place he has honestly earned; before the inevitable reaction sets in, and unmerited laudations have brought about an unmerited neglect. His life was arduous. His meagre physical means and his fervent spirit were pathetically ill-mated. It was impossible to survey his career without a sympathy which trembled from admiration to pity. Certain, in spite of all precaution, to die young, and in the face of that stern fact genially and unconquerably brave, he extorted love. Let the whole virtue of this truth be acknowledged, and let it stand in excuse for praises which have been carried beyond the limits of absurdity. It is hard to exercise a sober judgment where the emotions are brought strongly into play. The inevitable tragedy of Stevenson's fate, the unescapable assurance that he would not live to do all which such a spirit in a sounder frame would have done

for an art he loved so fondly, the magnetism of his friendship, his downright incapacity for envy, his genuine humility with regard to his own work and reputation, his unboastful and untiring courage, made a profound impression upon many of his contemporaries. It is, perhaps, small wonder if critical opinion were in part moulded by such influences as these. Errors of judgment thus induced are easily condoned. They are at least a million times more respectable than the mendacities of the publisher's tout, or the mutual ecstasies of the rollers of logs and the grinders of axes.

The curious ease with which, nowadays, every puny whipster gets the sword of Sir Walter has already been remarked. If any Tom o' Bedlam chooses to tell the world that all the New Scottish novelists are Sir Walter's masters, what does it matter to anybody? It is shamelessly silly and impertinent, of course, and it brings newspaper criticism into contempt, but there is an end of it. If the writers who are thus made ridiculous choose to pluck the straws out of their critics' hair and stick them in their own,

they are poorer creatures than I take them for. The thing makes us laugh, or makes us mourn, just as it happens to hit our humour; but it really matters very little. It establishes one of two things—the critic is hopelessly incapable or hopelessly dishonest. The dilemma is absolute. The peccant gentleman may choose his horn, and no honest and capable reader cares one copper which he takes.

But with regard to Stevenson the case is very different. Stevenson has made a bid for lasting fame. He is formally entered in the list of starters for the great prize of literary immortality. No man alive can say with certainty whether he will get it. Every forced eulogy handicaps his chances. Every exaggeration of his merits will tend to obscure them. The pendulum of taste is remorseless. Swing it too far on one side, it will swing itself too far on the other.

In his case it has unfortunately become a critical fashion to set him side by side with the greatest master of narrative fiction the world has ever seen. In the interests of a

true artist, whom this abuse of praise will greatly injure if it be persisted in, it will be well to endeavour soberly and quietly to measure the man, and to arrive at some approximate estimate of his stature.

It may be assumed that the least conscientious and instructed of our professional guides has read something of the history of Sir Walter Scott, and is, if dimly, aware of the effect he produced in the realm of literature in his lifetime. Sir Walter (who is surpassed or equalled by six writers of our own day, in the judgment of those astounding gentlemen who periodically tell us what we ought to think) was the founder of three great schools. He founded the school of romantic mediæval poetry; he founded the school of antiquarian romance; and he founded the school of Scottish-character romance. He did odds and ends of literary work, such as the compilation and annotation of 'The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,' and the notes to the poems and the Waverley Series. These were sparks from his great stithy, but a man of industry and talent

might have shown them proudly as a lifetime's labour. The great men in literature are the epoch makers, and Sir Walter is the only man in the literary history of the world who was an epoch maker in more than one direction. It is the fashion to-day to decry him as a poet. There are critics who, setting a high value on the verse of Wordsworth or of Browning, for example, cannot concede the name of poetry to any modern work which is not subtle and profound, metaphysical or analytical. But as a mere narrative poet few men whose judgment is of value will deny Scott the next place to Homer. As a poet he created an epoch. It filled no great space in point of time, but we owe to Sir Walter's impetus 'The Giaour,' 'The Corsair,' the 'Bride of Abydos.' In his second character of antiquarian romancist, he awoke the elder Dumas, and such a host of imitators, big and little, as no writer ever had at his heels before or since. When he turned to Scottish character he made Galt, and Robert Louis Stevenson, and Dr. George Macdonald, and all the modern gentlemen

who, gleaning modestly in the vast field he found, and broke, and sowed, and reaped, are now his rivals.

Do the writers who claim to guide our opinions read Scott at all? Do they know the scene of the hidden and revealed forces in the Trossach glen—the carriage of the Fiery Cross—the sentence on the erring nun—the last fight of her betrayer? Do they know the story of Jeannie Deans? But it is useless to ask these questions or to multiply these instances. Scott is placed. Master of laughter, master of tears, giant of swiftness; crowned king, without one all-round rival.

One of those astonishing and yet natural things which sometimes startle us is the value some minds attach to mere modernity in art. An old thing is tossed up in a new way, and there are those who attach more value to the way than the thing, and are instantly agape with admiration of originality. But originality and modishness are different things. People who have a right to guide public opinion discern the difference,

The absurd and damaging comparison

between Scott and Stevenson has been gravely offered by the latter's friends. They are doing a beautiful artist a serious injustice. You could place Stevenson's ravishing assortment of cameos in any chamber of Scott's feudal castle. It is an intaglio beside a cathedral, a humming-bird beside an eagle. It is anything exquisite beside anything nobly huge.

Let any man, who may be strongly of opinion that I am mistaken, conceive Scott and Stevenson living in the same age and working in complete ignorance of each other. Scott would still have set the world on fire. Stevenson with his deft, swift, adaptive spirit, and his not easily over-praised perfection in his craft, would have still done something; but he would have missed his loftiest inspiration, his style would have been far other than it is.

As a bit of pure literary enjoyment there are not many things better than to turn from Stevenson's more recent pages to Scott's letters in Lockhart's 'Life,' and to see where the modern found the staple of his best and latest style.

The comparison, which has been urged so often, will not stand a moment's examination. Stevenson is not a great creative artist. He is not an epoch maker. He cannot be set shoulder to shoulder with any of the giants. It is no defect in him which prompts this protest. Except in the sense in which his example of purity, delicacy, and finish in verbal work will inspire other artists, Stevenson will have no imitators, as original men always have. He has 'done delicious things,' but he has done nothing new. He has with astonishing labour and felicity built a composite style out of the style of every good writer of English. Even in a single page he sometimes reflected many manners. He is the embodiment of the literary as distinguished from the originating intellect. His method is almost perfect, but it is devoid of personality. He says countless things which are the very echo of Sir Walter's epistolary manner. He says things like Lamb, and sometimes they are as good as the original could have made them. He says things like Defoe, like Montaigne, like Rochefoucauld.

His bouquet is culled in every garden, and set in leaves which have grown in all forests of literature. He is deft, apt, sprightly, and always sincerely a man. He is just and brave, and essentially a gentleman. He has the right imitative romance, and he can so blend Defoe and Dickens with a something of himself which is almost, but not quite, creative, that he can present you with a blind old Pugh or a John Silver. He is a *littérateur* born—and made. A verbal invention is meat and drink to him. There are places where you see him actively in pursuit of one, as when Markheim stops the clock with 'an interjected finger,' or when John Silver's half-shut, cunning, and cruel eye sparkles 'like a crumb of glass.' Stevenson has run across the Channel for that crumb, and it is worth the journey.

Stevenson certainly had that share of genius which belongs to the man who can take infinite pains. Add to this a beautiful personal character, and an almost perfect receptivity. Add again the power of sympathetic realisation in a purely literary sense,

and you have the man. Let me make my last addition clear. It is a common habit of his to think as his literary favourites would have thought. He could think like Lamb. He could think like Defoe. He could even fuse two minds in this way, and make, as it were, a composite mind for himself to think with. His intellect was of a very rare and delicate sort, and whilst he was essentially a reproducer, he was in no sense an imitator, or even for a single second a plagiarist. He had an alembic of his own which made old things new. His best possession was that very real sense of proportion which was at the root of all his humour. 'Why doesn't God explain these things to a gentleman like me?' There, a profound habitual reverence of mind suddenly encounters with a ludicrous perception of his own momentary self-importance. The two electric opposites meet, and emit that flash of summer lightning.

Stevenson gave rare honour to his work, and the artist who shows his self-respect in that best of ways will always be respected by the world. He has fairly won our affec-

tion and esteem, and we give them ungrudgingly. In seeming to belittle him I have taken an ungrateful piece of work in hand. But in the long run a moderately just estimate of a good man's work is of more service to his reputation than a strained laudation can be. It is not the critics, and it is not I, who will finally measure his proportions. He seems to me to stand well in the middle of the middle rank of accepted writers. He will not live as an inventor, for he has not invented. He will not live as one of those who have opened new fields of thought. He will not live amongst those who have explored the heights and the deeps of the spirit of man. He may live—'the stupid and ignorant pig of a public' will settle the question—as a writer in whose works stand revealed a lovable, sincere, and brave soul and an unsleeping vigilance of artistic effort.

The most beautiful thing he has done—to my mind—is his epitaph. There are but eight lines of it, but I know nothing finer in its way:

Under the wide and starry sky
Lay me down and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will!
This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be:
Home is the Sailor, home from sea,
And the Hunter home from the hill.

Sleep there, bright heart! In your waking hours you would have laughed at the exaggerated praises which do you such poor service now!

IV

LIVING MASTERS—MEREDITH AND HALL CAINE

THERE is a very old story to the effect that a party of gentlemen who were compiling a dictionary described a crab as 'a small red animal which walks backwards.' Apart from the facts that the crab is not red, is not an animal, and does not walk backwards, the definition was pronounced to be wholly admirable. I was reminded of this bit of ancient history when, some time ago, I read a criticism on George Meredith from the pen of Mr. George Moore. Mr. Moore represented his subject as a shouting, gesticulating man in a crowd, who, in spite of great efforts to be heard, remained unintelligible. As a description of a curiously calm sage who soliloquises for his own amusement in a study this is perfect. The enormous growth in the

number of unthinking readers, and the corresponding increase in our printed output, have brought about some singular conditions, and, amongst them, this: that it is possible to sustain a reputation by the mere act of being absurd.

In attempting anything like a just review of the influence of the critical press in recent years, one has to admit that in its treatment of George Meredith it has performed a very considerable and praiseworthy public service. For many years Meredith worked in obscurity so far as the general public were concerned. Here and there he won an impassioned admirer, and from his beginning it may be said that he found audience fit though few; but he owes much of the present extent of his reputation to the efforts of generous and enlightened critics, who would not let the public rest until they had at least given his genius a hearing. He is now, and has for some time been, a fashionable cult. It is not likely that in the broad sense he will ever be a popular writer, for the mass of novel-readers are an idle and pleasure-loving folk, and no

mere idler and pleasure-seeker will read Meredith often or read him long at a time. The little book which the angel gave to John of Patmos, commanding that he should eat it, was like honey in the mouth, but in the belly it was bitter. To the reader who first approaches him, a book of Meredith's offers an accurate contrast to the roll presented by the angel. It is tough chewing, but in digestion most suave and fortifying. The people who instantly enjoy him, who relish him at first bite, are rare. Fine intelligences are always rare. Personally, I am not one of the happy few. I am at my third reading of any one of Meredith's later books before I am wholly at my ease with it. I can find a most satisfying simile (to myself). A new book of Meredith's comes to me like a hamper of noble wines. I know the vintages, and I rejoice. I set to work to open the hamper. It is corded and wired in the most exasperating way, but at last I get it open. That is my first reading. Then I range my bottles in the cellar—port, burgundy, hock, champagne, imperial tokay;

subtle and inspiring beverages, not grown in common vineyards, and demanding to be labelled. That is my second reading. Then I sit down to my wine, and that is my third; and in any book of Meredith's I have a cellarful for a lifetime.

In view of a benefaction like this it becomes a man to be grateful, but for all that it is a pity that a great writer and a willing reader should be held apart by any avoidable hindrances. It is quite true that an immediate popularity is no test of high merit. But the real man of genius is, after all, he who permanently appeals to the widest public.

To the middle-aged and the elderly fiction is a luxury. A story-book is like a pipe. It soothes and gratifies, and it helps an idle hour to pass. But younger people find actual food or actual poison where their elders find mere amusement. There are hundreds of thousands of young men and women who feel that they would like to have a clear outlook on things, who are searching more or less in earnest for a mental standing-

place and point of view. If I had my way they should all be made to read Meredith, and the book at which I would start them should be 'The Shaving of Shagpat.' It is in the nature of a handbook or guide to a young person of genius, it is true, and we can't all be persons of genius; but there is enough human nature in it to make it serviceable to all but the stupid. In the midst of its fantastic phantasmagoria there is a view of life so sane, so lofty, so feminine-tender, so masculine-strong, so piercing, keen and clear, that it is not easy to find an expression for admiration which shall be at once adequate and sober. On the mere surface it is almost as good as the 'Arabian Nights,' and at the first flush of it you think that fancy is running riot. But when once the intention is grasped you find beneath that playful foam of seeming fun and frolic a very astonishing and deep philosophy, and the whole wild masquerade is filled with meaning. Read 'The Shaving of Shagpat,' earnest young men and maidens. There is not much that is better for mere amusement in all the

libraries, and if you care for the ripe conclusions of a scholar and a gentleman who knows the whole game of life better than any other man now living, you may find them there.

I learn, on very good authority, that Meredith has but a poor comparative opinion of his earlier work, and that he would dissent rather strongly from the critic who pronounced 'The Ordeal of Richard Feverel' his masterpiece. Yet it seems to me to be so, and in one particular it takes high rank indeed. It is remarkable that whilst love-making is so essential a part of the general human business, and whilst no novel or play which ignores it stands much chance of success, there are only two or three really virile presentations in fiction of 'the way of a man with a maid.' Shakspere gave us one in 'Romeo and Juliet,' but then Shakspere gave us everything. Charles Reade, in 'Hard Cash,' has shown us a pure girl growing into pure passion—a bit of truth and beauty which alone might make a sterling and enduring name for him. And Meredith

in 'Feverel' has given us scenes of young courtship which are beyond the praises of a writer like myself. The two young people on their magic island are amongst the real-ideal figures which haunt my mind with sweetness. Nature on either side is virginal. It flames and trembles with natural passion both in boy and girl, and they are as pure as a pair of daisies. Any workman in the school of Namby-Pamby could have kept their purity. Any writer of the Roman-candle-volcanic tribe could have heaped up their fires, after a fashion. But for this special piece of work God had first to make a gentleman, and then to give him genius.

One peculiarity in Meredith is worthy of notice. He makes known to us the interior personality of his characters; he does this so completely that we are persuaded that we could predict their line of conduct in given circumstances; and then a set of circumstances occur in which they do something we should never have believed of them, and we have to confess that their maker is just and right, and that there is no disputing him.

There are inconsistencies in his pages more glaring than anything we can imagine outside real life. The average artist, dealing with these manifestations, is a spectacle for pity, as the average man would be on Blondin's tight rope. The faintest deviation, the most momentary uncertainty of footing, a doubt, even, and it is all over. But Meredith never falters. He proves the impossible true by the mere fact of recording it.

He has no cranks or crazes or 'isms. He sees human nature with an eye which is at once broad and microscopic. What seem the very faults of style are virtues pushed to an extreme. He says more in a page than most men can say in a chapter. Modern science can put the nutritive properties of a whole ox into a very modest canister. Meredith's best sentences have gone through just such a digestive process. He is not for everybody's table, but he is a pride and a delight to the pick of English epicures.

From Meredith to Hall Caine is from the study of the analyst to the foundry of the statuary; from art in cold calm to art in

stormy fire. Here, too, is a force at work but it is strength at stress, and not at ease. Meredith is not very greatly moved. He sympathises, but he sympathises from the brain. His heart is right towards the world, but it is cool. The man we are now dealing with has a passionate sympathy. He is hot at heart, and he does not look on at the movement of mankind as merely understanding it, and analysing it, and liking it, and making allowances for it. He is tumultuous and urgent, daring and impetuous, eager to say a great word. His conceptions shake him. They are all grandiose and huge. The great passions are awake in them—avarice, lust, hate, love, god-like pity, supreme courage, base fear. The whole trend of his mind is towards the heroic. He struggles to be in touch with the actual, and he makes many incursions upon it, but Romance snatches him away again, and claims him for her own. His native and ineradicable concept of a work of art in fiction is a story that shall shake the soul. This inborn passion for the vast and splendid in spiritual things

is always in strict subordination to a moral purpose. Here is the reason for his hold upon the English-speaking people, which is probably, at this moment, deeper and wider than that of any other living writer.

I do not deal in what I am now about to say with the critical adjustment of relative powers, but simply with a question of temperament. You may draw a triangle, and at one of its extremes you may place Meredith, at another Stevenson, and at another Hall Caine. At one extremity you have an artist whose methods are almost purely intellectual, at the next you have an embodiment of sympathetic receptivity, and at the third a man whose forces are almost wholly emotional and dynamic. Stevenson's main literary prompting was to say a thing as well as it could possibly be said. Hall Caine's chief spur is a fiery impulse to a moral warning.

From the earliest stages of Hall Caine's literary career until now his impulse has not changed, but he has made such a steady advance in craftsmanship as could not be made by any man who did not take his work

in serious earnest. The faults of his first style still linger, but they are chastened. He has the defect of his quality. In each of his books he strives for an increasing stress of passion, a sustained crescendo; a full and steady breeze for the beginning, and then a gale, a tempest, a tornado. The story is always constructed with this view towards emotional growth and culmination. Sometimes he lets us see the effort this prodigious task imposes upon him, but in his later work more and more rarely. The natural temptation is towards a resonant and insistent eloquence, and he occasionally still forgets that he might, with ease to himself, profitably leave the catastrophe he has created to make its own impression. The artistic demand in the form of work to which his instinct draws him is heavier than in any other. It is simply to be white-hot in purpose and stone-cold in self-criticism at the same instant of time.

Bar Meredith, who is quite *sui generis*, and Rudyard Kipling, whose characteristics will be dealt with later on, Hall Caine has

less of the mark of his predecessors upon him than any of his contemporaries. His work has grown out of himself. He has had a word to speak, and he has spoken it. So far he has increased in strength with every book, has grown more master of his own conceptions and himself. In 'A Son of Hagar' he forced his story upon his reader in defiance of possibility; but no such blot on construction as the continued presence of a London cad in the person of a Cumberland man in the latter's native village has been seen in his more recent work. It is worth notice that even in this portion of his story the narrator shows no remotest sign of a disposition to crane at any of the numerous fences which lie before him. He takes them all in his stride, and the reader goes with him, willy-nilly, protesting perhaps, but helplessly whirled along in the author's grip. This faculty of daring is sometimes an essential to the story-teller's art, and Hall Caine has it in abundance, not merely in the occasional facing of improbabilities, but in that much loftier and more admirable form where

it enables him to confront the cataclysmic emotions of the mind, and to carry to a legitimate conclusion scenes of tremendous conception and of no less tremendous difficulty. In the minds of vulgar and careless readers the defects which are hardest to separate from this form of art are so many added beauties, just as the over-emphasis of a tragic actor is the very thing which best appeals to the gallery. But Hall Caine does not address himself to the vulgar and the careless. He is eager to leave his reputation to his peers and to posterity. With every year of ripening power his capacity for self-restraint has grown. When it has come of age in him, there will be nothing but fair and well. There has been no man in his time who has shown a deeper reverence for his work, or a more consistent increase in his command of it. His method is large and noble, in accord with his design. He has given us the right to look to him for better and better and always better, and it is only in the direction indicated that he can mend.

V

LIVING MASTERS—RUDYARD KIPLING

I WAS 'up in the back blocks' of Victoria when I lighted upon some stray copies of the weekly edition of the 'Melbourne Argus,' and became aware of the fact that we had amongst us a new teller of stories, with a voice and a physiognomy of his own. The 'Argus' had copied from some journal in far-away India a poem and a story, each unsigned, and each bearing evidence of the same hand. A year later I came back to England, and found everybody talking about 'The Man from Nowhere,' who had just taken London by storm. Rudyard Kipling's best work was not as yet before us, but there was no room for doubt as to the newcomer's quality, and the only question possible was as to whether he had come to stay. That inquiry has now been satisfactorily

answered. The new man of half a dozen years ago is one of England's properties, and not the one of which she is least proud. About midway in his brief and brilliant career, counting from his emergence until now, people began to be afraid that he had emptied his sack. Partly because he had lost the spell of novelty, and partly because he did too much to be always at his best, there came a time when we thought we saw him sinking to a place with the ruck.

Sudden popularity carries with it many grave dangers, but the gravest of all is the temptation to produce careless and unripe work. To this temptation the new man succumbed, but only for awhile. Like the candid friend of Lady Clara Vere de Vere, he saw the snare, and he retired. But at the time when, instead of handing out the bread of life in generous slices, he took to giving us the sweepings of the basket I wrote a set of verses, which I called 'The Ballad of the Rudyard Kipling.' I never printed it, because by the time it was fairly written

Kipling's work had not merely gone back to its first quality, but seemed brighter and finer than before, and the poor thing, such as it was, was in the nature of a satire. I venture to write down the opening verses here, since they express the feeling with which at least one writer of English fiction hailed his first appearance.

I

Oh, we be master mariners that sail the snorting seas,
Right red-plucked mariners that dare the peril of the storm,
But we be old and worn and cold, and far from rest and ease,
And only love and brotherhood can keep our tired hearts warm.

II

We were a noble company in days not long gone by,
And mighty craft our elders sailed to every earthly shore.
Men of worship, and dauntless soul, that feared nor sea nor sky;
But God's hand stilled the valiant hearts, and the masters sail no more.

III

And for awhile, though we be brave and handy of our trade,
We sailed no master-galleon, but wrought in cockboats all,
Slight craft and manned with a single hand; yet many a trip we made,
Though we but crept from port to port with cargoes scant and small.

IV

But on a day of wonder came ashining on the deep,
A royal Splendour, proud with sail, and generous roar of guns;
She passed us, and we gaped and stared. Her lofty bows were steep,
And deep she rode the waters deep with a weight of countless tons.

V

Her rig was strange, her name unknown, she came we knew not whence,
But on the flag at her peak we read 'The Drums of the Fore and Aft.'
And—I speak for one—my breath came thick and my pulse beat hard and tense,
And we cheered with tears of splendid joy at sight of the splendid craft.

VI

She swept us by; her master came and spoke us from the side;
We knew our elder, though his beard was scarce yet fully grown;
She spanked for home through churning foam with favouring wind and tide,
And while we hailed like mad he sailed, a King, to take his own.

Some men are born rich, and some are born lucky, and some are born both to luck and riches. Kipling is one of the last. Nature endowed him with uncommon quali-

ties, and circumstances sent him into the sphere in which those qualities could be most fortunately exercised. It seems strange that the great store of treasure which he opened to us should have been unhandled and unknown so long. His Indian pictures came like a revelation. It is always so when a man of real genius dawns upon the world. It was so when Scott showed men and women the jewelled mines of romance which lay in the highways and byways of homely Scotland. It was so when Dickens bared the Cockney hearth to the sight of all men. Meg Merrilies, and Rob Roy, and Edie Ochiltree were all *there*—the wild, the romantic, the humorous were at the doors of millions of men before Scott saw them. In London, in the early days of Dickens, there were hordes of capable writers eager for something new. Not one of them saw Bob Cratchit, or Fagin, or the Marchioness until Dickens saw them. So, in India, the British Tommy had lived for many a year, and the jungle beasts were there, and Government House and its society were there, and capable

men went up and down the land, sensible of its charm, its wonder, its remoteness from themselves, and yet not discerning truly. At last, when a thousand feet have trodden upon a thing of inestimable price, there comes along a newspaper-man, doing the driest kind of hackwork, bound to a drudgery as stale and dreary as any in life, and he sees what no man has ever seen before him, though it has been plain in view for years and years. Through scorn and discouragement and contumely he polishes his treasure, in painful hours snatched from distasteful labour, and at last he brings it where it can be seen and known for what it is.[1]

It is only genius which owns the seeing eye. There are in Great Britain to-day a dozen writers of fine faculty, trained to observe, trained to give to observation its fullest

[1] I learn, on the very best authority, that Mr. Kipling regards his early and unrecognised days in India with much kindlier eyes than this would seem to indicate. It may be thought that, knowing this, I should amend or delete the passage. I let it stand, however, with this note as a qualification, because I think it possible that he, like the rest of us, looks on the past through tinted spectacles.

artistic result; and they are all panting for something new. The something new is under their noses. They see it and touch it every day. If I could find it, my name in a year would sail over the seas, and I should be a great personage. But I shall not find it. None of the men who are now known will find it. It is always the unknown man who makes that sort of discovery. He will come in time, and when he comes we shall wonder and admire, and say: 'How new! How true!' Why, in that very matter of Tommy Atkins, whose manifold portraits have done as much as anything to endear Kipling to the English people—it is known to many that in my own foolish youth I enlisted in the Army. I lived with Tommy. I fought and chaffed and drank and drilled and marched, and went 'up tahn' with him, and did pack drill, and had C.B. with him. I turned novel-writer afterwards, and never so much as dreamt of giving Tommy a place in my pages. Then comes Kipling, not knowing him one-half as well in one way, and knowing him a thousand times better

in another way, and makes a noble and beautiful and merited reputation out of him; shows the man inside the military toggery, and makes us laugh and cry, and exult with feeling. There was a man in New South Wales—a shepherd—who went raving mad when he learnt that the heavy black dust which spoilt his pasture was tin, and that he had waked and slept for years without discovering the gigantic fortune which was all about him. I will not go mad, if I can help it, but I do think it rather hard lines on me that I hadn't the simple genius to see what lay in Tommy.

A good deal has been said of the occasional coarseness of Kipling's pages. There are readers who find it offensive, and they have every right to the expression of their feelings. I confess to having been startled once or twice, but never in a wholly disagreeable fashion—never as 'Jude the Obscure' startled. Poor Captain Mayne Reid, who is still beloved by here and there a schoolboy, wrote a preface to one of his books—I think 'The Rifle Rangers,' but it

is years on years since I saw it—in order to put forth his defence for the introduction of an occasional oath or impious expletive in the conversation of his men of the prairies. He pleaded necessity. It was impossible to portray his men without it. And he argued that an oath does not soil the mind 'like the clinging immorality of an unchaste episode.' The majority of Englishmen will agree with the gallant Captain. Kipling is rough at times, and daring, but he is always clean and honest. There are no hermaphroditic cravings after sexual excitement in him. He is too much of a man to care for that kind of thing.

What a benefactor an honest laughter-maker is! Since Dickens there has been nobody to fill our lungs like Kipling. Is it not better that the public should have 'My Lord the Elephant' and 'Brugglesmith' to laugh outright at than that they should be feebly sniggering over the jest-books begotten on English Dulness by Yankee humour, as they were eight or nine years ago? That jugful of Cockney sky-blue, with a feeble

dash of Mark Twain in it, which was called 'Three Men in a Boat' was not a cheerful tipple for a mental bank-holiday, but we poor moderns got no better till the coming of Kipling. We have a right to be grateful to the man who can make us laugh.

The thing which strikes everybody who reads Kipling—and who does not?—is the truly astonishing range of his knowledge of technicalities. He is very often beyond me altogether, but I presume him to be accurate, because nobody finds him out, and that is a thing which specialists are so fond of doing that we may be sure they would have been about him in clouds if he had been vulnerable. He gives one the impression at times of being arrogant about this special fund of knowledge. But he nowhere cares to make his modesty conspicuous to the reader, and his cocksureness is only the obverse of his best literary virtue. It comes from the very crispness and definiteness with which he sees things. There are no clouds about the edges of his perceptions. They are all clear and *nette*. Things observed by such a man dogmatise to the mind, and it is natural that

he should dogmatise as to what he sees with such apparent precision and completeness.

A recent writer, anonymous, but speaking from a respectable vehicle as platform, has told us that the short story is the highest form into which any expression of the art of fiction can be cast. This to me looks very like nonsense. I do not know any short story which can take rank with 'Père Goriot,' or 'Vanity Fair,' or 'David Copperfield.' The short story has charms of its own, and makes demands of its own. What those demands are only the writers who have subjected themselves to its tyranny can know. The ordinary man who tries this form of art finds early that he is emptying his mental pockets. Kipling's riches in this respect have looked as if they were without end, and no man before him has paid away so much. But it has to be remembered here that in many examples of his power in this way he has been purely episodic, and the discovery or creation of an episode is a much simpler thing than the discovery or creation of a story proper, which is a collection of episodes, arranged in close sequence, and leading to a

catastrophe, tragic or comic, as the theme may determine.

In estimating the value of any writer's work you must take his range into consideration. Kipling stretches, in emotion, from deep seriousness to exuberant laughter; and his grasp of character is quite firm and sure, whether he deal with Mrs. Hawksbee or with Dinah Shadd; with a field officer or with Mulvaney, Ortheris, and Learoyd; with the Inspector of Forests or with Mowgli. He knows the ways of thinking of them all, and he knows the tricks of speech of all, and the outer garniture and daily habitudes of all. His mind seems furnished with an instantaneous camera and a phonographic recorder in combination; and keeping guard over this rare mental mechanism is a spirit of catholic affection and understanding.

Finally, he is an explorer, one of the original discoverers, one of the men who open new regions to our view. A revelation has waited for him. He is as much the master of his English compeers in originality as Stevenson was their master in finished craftsmanship.

VI

UNDER FRENCH ENCOURAGEMENT—THOMAS HARDY

WITHIN the last half-score of years an extraordinary impulse towards freedom in the artistic representation of life has touched some of our English writers. Thackeray, in 'Pendennis,' laments that since Fielding no English novelist has 'dared to draw a man.' Dr. George Macdonald, in his 'Robert Falconer,' whispers, in a sort of stage *aside*, his wish that it were possible to be both decent and honest in the exposition of the character of the Baron of Rothie, who is a seducer by profession. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of Thackeray was, that he was a gentleman, and that his good-breeding and his manliness were essentially of the English pattern. Dr. Macdonald's most intense impulse is towards

purity of life, as an integral necessity for that communion with the Eternal Fatherhood which he preaches with so much earnestness and charm. That two such men should have felt that their work was subject to a painful limitation on one side of it is significant, but it is a fact which may be used with equal force as an argument by the advocates of the old method and the adopters of the new. It is perfectly true that they felt the restriction, but it is equally true that they respected it, and were resolute not to break through it. Their cases are cited here, not as an aid to argument on one side or the other, but simply to show that the argument itself is no new thing—that the question as to how far freedom is allowable has been debated in the minds of honest writers, and decided in one way, long before it came to be debated by another set of honest writers, who decided it in another.

There never was an age in which outspoken honesty was indecent. There never was an age in which pruriency in any guise could cease to be indecent. There never

was an age when the fashion of outspoken honesty did not give a seeming excuse to pruriency; and it is this fact, that freedom in the artistic presentation of the sexual problems has invariably led to license, which has in many successive ages of literature forced the artist back to restraint, and has made him content to be bound by a rigid puritanism. In the beat of the eternal pendulum of taste it seems ordained that puritanism shall become so very puritanic that art shall grow tired of its bonds, and that liberty in turn shall grow offensive, and shall compel art by an overmastering instinct to return towards puritanism.

It is France which has led the way in the latest protest against the restrictions imposed by modern taste upon art. It may be admitted as a fact that those restrictions were felt severely, for it is obvious that until they began to chafe there was no likelihood of their being violently broken. The chief apostle of the new movement towards entire freedom is, of course, Emile Zola. After having excited for many years an incredulous

amazement and disgust, he is now almost universally recognised as an honest and honourable artist, and as a great master in his craft. Nobody who is at all instructed ventures any longer to say that Zola is indecent because he loves indecency, or is pleased by the contemplation of the squalid and obscene. We see him as he truly is—a pessimist in humanity—sad and oppressed, and bitter with the gall of a hopeless sympathy with suffering and distorted mankind.

One English artist, whom, in the just language of contemporary criticism, it is no exaggeration to describe as great, has elected (rather late in life for so strong a departure) to cast in his lot with the new school. That his ambitions are wholly honourable it would be the mere vanity of injustice to deny. That his new methods contrast very unfavourably with his old ones, that he is lending the weight of his authority to a movement which is full of mischief, that in obeying in all sincerity an artistic impulse he is doing a marked disservice to his own art

in particular, and to English art in general, are with me so many rooted personal convictions; but I dare not pretend that they are more. Mr. Hardy is just as sincere in his belief that he is right as I and others among his critics are in our belief that he is wrong. The question must be threshed out dispassionately and judicially, if it be faced at all. It cannot be settled by an appeal to personal sentiment on either side. But in the limits to which I am now restricted it is impossible to do justice to the discussion, and it would, indeed, be barely possible to state even the whole of its terms.

I am forced to content myself, therefore, with a temperamental expression of opinion in place of a judicial one, pleading only that the arguments against me are recognised and respected, although I have no present opportunity of recapitulating and disputing them. It appears, then—to speak merely as an advocate *ex parte*—to us of the old school that an essential part of the fiction writer's duty is to be harmless. That, of course, to the men of the cayenne-pepper-caster creed

seems a very milky sort of proclamation, but to us it is a matter of grave moment. I have always thought, for my own part, that the novelist might well take for his motto the last five words of that passage in 'The Tempest' where we read: 'This isle is full of noises, sounds and sweet airs, which *give delight and hurt not.*' Simple as the motto seems, it will be found to offer a fairly wide range. When Reade tilted against prison abuses and the abuses of private asyla, or when Dickens rode down on the law of Chancery as administered in his day, or when Thackeray scourged snobbery aud selfishness in society, they were all well within the limits of this rule. We experience a delight which hurts not, but on the contrary is entirely tonic and inspiring, when Satire swings his lash on the bared back of Hypocrisy or cruel and intentioned Vice. We experience a delight which hurts not, but on the contrary freshens the whole flood of feeling within us, when a true artist deals truly with the sorrows and infirmities of our kind. To offer it as our intent to give delight and hurt

not is no mere profession of an artistic Grundyism. It is the proclamation of what is to our minds the simple truth, that fiction should be a joyful, an inspiring, a sympathetic, and a helpful art. There are certain questions the public discussion of which we purposely avoid. There are certain manifestations of character the exhibition of which we hold to be something like a crime.

Mr. Hardy would plead, and with perfectly apparent propriety, that he does not choose to write for 'the young person.' But I answer that he cannot help himself. He cannot choose his audience. Fiction appeals to everybody, and fiction so robust, so delicate and charming as his own finds its way into all hands. When a man can take a hall, and openly advertise that he intends to speak therein 'to men only,' he is reasonably allowed a certain latitude. If he pitches his cart on the village green, and talks with the village lads and lasses within hearing, he will, if he be a decent fellow, avoid the treatment of certain themes.

To take the most striking example:—in 'Jude the Obscure' Mr. Hardy deals very largely with the emotions and reasons which animate a young woman when she decides not to sleep with her husband, when she decides that she will sleep with her husband, when she decides to sleep with a man who is not her husband, and when she decides not to sleep with the man who is not her husband. Now, all this does not matter to the mentally solid and well-balanced reader. It is not very interesting, for one thing, and apart from the fact that it is, from a workman's point of view, astonishingly well done, it would not be interesting at all. Mr. Hardy offers it as the study of a temperament. Very well. It is an excellent study of a temperament, but it bores. The theme is not big enough to be worth the effort expended upon it. Here is an hysterical, wrong-headed, and confused-hearted little hussy who can't make up her mind as to what is right and what is wrong, and who is a prey to the impulse of the moment, psychical or physical. I don't think there are many people like her. I

don't think that from the broad human-natural point of view it matters a great deal how she decides. But I am sure of this—that the more that kind of small monstrosity is publicly analysed and anatomised and made much of, the more her morbidities will increase in her, and the more unbearable in real life she is likely to become. Mr. Hardy's labour in this particular is a direct incentive to the study of hysteria as a fine art amongst such women as are natively prone to it. One of the gravest dangers which beset women is that of hysterical self-deception. The common-sense fashion of dealing with them when they suffer in that way is kindly and gently to ignore their symptoms until the reign of common-sense returns. To make them believe that their emotions are worthy of the scrutiny of a great analyst of the human heart is to increase their morbid temptations, and in the end to render those temptations irresistible. The one kind of person to whom 'Jude the Obscure' must necessarily appeal with the greatest power is the kind of person depicted in its pages, and the tendency of the

book is unavoidably towards the development and multiplication of the type described. This is the only end the book can serve, apart from the fact that it does reveal to us Mr. Hardy's special knowledge of a dangerous and disagreeable form of mental disorder. But it is not the physician's business to sow disease, and any treatise on hysteria which is thrown into a captivating popular form, and makes hysteria look like an interesting and romantic thing, will spread the malady as surely as a spark will ignite gunpowder. This at least is not a mere matter of opinion, but of sound scientific fact, which no student of that disorder which Mr. Hardy has so masterfully handled will deny. In this respect, then, the book is a centre of infection, and that the author of 'A Pair of Blue Eyes' should have written it is matter at once for astonishment and grief. That is to say, it is a matter of astonishment and grief to me, and to those who think as I do. There is a large and growing contingent of writers and readers to whom it is a theme for joyful congratulation. It is one of the rules of the game we

are now playing to respect all honest conviction.

Of Mr. Hardy, from the purely artistic side, there is little time to speak. On that side let me first set down what is to be said in dispraise, for the mere sake of leaving a sweet taste in the mouth at the end. Even from his own point of view—that lauded 'sense of the overwhelming sadness of modern life' which captivates the admirers of his latest style—it is possible to spread the epic table of sorrow without finding a place upon it for scraps of the hoggish anatomy which are not nameable except in strictly scientific or wholly boorish speech. But it seems necessary to the new realism that its devotee should be able to write for the perusal of gentlemen and ladies about things he dared not mention orally in the presence of either; so that what a drunken cabman would be deservedly kicked for saying in a lady's hearing may be honourably printed for a lady's reading by a scholar and a sage. It was once thought otherwise, but I am arguing here, not against realism *per se*, but against the

inartistic introduction of gross episodes. Every reader of Mr. Hardy will recognise my meaning, and the passage in my mind seems gratuitously and unserviceably offensive.

To come to less unpleasing themes, where, still expressing disapproval, one may do it with some grace, one of the few limitations to Mr. Hardy's great charm as a writer lies in his tendency to encumber his page with detail. At a supremely romantic moment one of his people sits down to contemplate a tribe of ants, and watches them through two whole printed pages. In another case a man in imminent deadly peril surveys through two pages the history of the geologic changes which have befallen our planet. Each passage, taken by itself, is good enough. Taken where it is, each is terribly wearisome and wrong.

I do not know that any critic has yet recorded Mr. Hardy's singular limitations as to the invention of plot. Speaking from memory, I cannot at this moment recall a novel of his in which some trouble does not circle about a marriage licence, and I can

recall many instances of going to church to get married and coming back single. That, indeed, is Mr. Hardy's *pièce de résistance* in the way of invention, and it crops up in one book after another with a helpless inevitableness which at last grows comic.

But here we can afford to have done with carping, and can turn to the much more grateful task of praise. I do not think it too much to say that Mr. Hardy has studied his own especial part of England, has made himself master of its landscape, its town and hamlet life, its tradition and sentiment, and general spiritual atmosphere, to such triumphant effect as to set himself wholly apart from all other English writers of fiction. His devotion to his own beloved Wessex has brought him this rich and merited reward—that he is the recognised first and final master of its field. His knowledge of rustic life within his own borders is beautifully sympathetic and profound. His impression of the landscape in the midst of which this life displays itself is broad and noble and alive. His literary style is a thing to admire,

to study, and to admire again. All worthy readers of English fiction are his debtors for many idyllic happy hours, and many deep inspirations of wholesome English air. And if, at the parting of the ways, we wave a decisive farewell to him, we are not unmindful of the time when he was the best and dearest of our comrades, and we leave him in the certainty that, whatever path he has chosen, he has been guided in his choice by an ambition which is entirely honourable and sincere.

VII

UNDER FRENCH ENCOURAGEMENT— GEORGE MOORE

THAT salt of sincerity which saves 'Jude the Obscure' and 'Tess o' the D'Urbervilles' from being wholly nauseous, is absent from 'A Modern Lover' and 'A Drama in Muslin,' and its flavour is but faintly perceptible in 'Esther Waters.' Except on the distinct understanding that Thomas Hardy and George Moore are bracketed here, for the sake of convenience, as being both 'under French encouragement,' it would be a gross critical injustice to couple their names together at all. It is not one man of letters in a hundred who has Mr. Hardy's mere literary faculty, which is native and brilliant, whilst Mr. Moore's has been painstakingly hunted for and brought from afar, and is, after much polishing, still a trifle

dull. Mr. Thomas Hardy is distinctly one of those men who see things through an atmosphere of their own. Mr. George Moore has borrowed his atmosphere. The one is a man of genius as well as labour, and the other is a man of labour only.

It is very much of a pity that, a year or two ago, somebody's sense of Mr. Moore's position in the world of letters should have been very absurdly emphasised. It was solemnly advertised that a certain number of copies of a book of his might be had on large paper, with the autograph of the author. This was to be regretted, for Mr. Moore, in his own way, is worth taking seriously, whilst the trick is one of those which, as a rule, can only be played by the poorest kind of literary outsider. But that the author should have permitted himself to be thus made ridiculous is a characteristic thing, and one not to be passed in silence if we wish to understand him.

Consulting the critics, one of the first things we find about Mr. Moore is that he is an observer. As a matter of fact, that is

absolutely what he is not. He is so far from being an observer that he is that diametrically opposite person, a man with a notebook. The man who amongst men of letters deserves to be ranked as an observer is he who naturally and without effort sees things in their just place, aspect, proportion, and perspective. The man who is often falsely described by the title which expresses this faculty is a careful and painstaking soul, who is strenuously on the watch for detail, and who takes much trouble to fill his pages with it.

Let me offer a concrete illustration. In 'Esther Waters' Mr. Moore is curiously and meaninglessly emphatic in his description of a certain room in which the heroine of his action sleeps. Esther, we are told, slipped on her nightdress and got into bed. It was a brass bed without curtains. There were two windows in the room. One of them was flush with the head of the bed, and the other was beyond its foot. A chest of drawers stood between them. An observer, unless he had a special purpose in it, would

never have dreamt of writing down this bald detail. Nothing comes of the statement of fact. Nothing hangs on the relative position of the bed and the windows and the chest of drawers. Nothing happens in the course of the story which justifies the flat and flavourless statement. It is wholly without meaning, apart from the fact that it affords rather a plain insight into the author's method of work. If a child of three after visiting a strange bedroom were able to tell as much about it as Mr. Moore has to tell about this apartment, his mother would probably be proud of him, and his nurse would say that he was a notice-taking little creature; but the critics would hardly hold him up to admiration as an observer. Yet the child would tell us just as much and just as little as Mr. Moore tells us in this particular instance. It goes without saying that this is not a fair specimen of Mr. Moore's faculty, but it is significant of his general literary knack. He makes it his business steadfastly to jot down what he sees, and it is not impossible that

in the course of a long and laborious life a man might in this way cultivate to a reasonable growth a turn for observation originally less than mediocre; but it is not the natural observer's method of seeing things, and it is not the natural artist's method of presenting them. If the critics in this case were in the right we should have to acknowledge an auctioneer's catalogue as a *chef d'œuvre.*

To the sympathetic reader it was evident from the first that Mr. Moore was not greatly enamoured of his work for its own sake, and that he chose his themes, not because of any imperative attraction they had for him, but simply and purely for the use to which he could put them. His choice of subject has always been the result of a deliberate search for the effective. The mental process which gave rise to 'A Mummer's Wife' is easily traceable. The domestic life of the class of people he made up his mind to treat was as little known to him as to almost anybody, but if properly handled it was pretty sure to make good copy. He must know it first, however, and

so he set himself to learn it. This is the Zola method, but it is that method with a difference. The great French master started with an inspired and inspiring scheme, his idea being no less than to paint the society of an epoch from top to base, to present in a series of books, the writing of which should fill his literary lifetime, a completed portraiture of the whole people of his land and day. In the course of such a labour as he had courageously appointed for himself, many lines of special inquiry were necessarily indicated, but the details for which he searched were all employed with an artistic remorselessness in the building of that one great scheme of his, and each successive book which left his hands was like one more nail driven home and clinched for the support of his argument. Mr. Moore, as those who are honoured by his personal acquaintance know better than those who only read his books, resents with some warmth the obvious parallel which has been drawn between Zola and himself; but he is a copyist of Zola's method for all that,

and but for Zola's influence would never have been heard of on his own present lines.

In the writing of the 'Mummer's Wife' the first obvious impulse came from Zola. It should be the writer's business to discover a section of English life not hitherto exploited—it should be his business to explore it with a minute thoroughness—and it should, further, be his business to depict it as he found it. To be thoroughly painstaking in inquiry, and without fear in the exposition of facts discovered, were the aims before the writer. But Mr. Moore forgot, as was inevitable in the circumstances, that no desire for knowledge of things human is of real value without sympathy. He followed the fortunes of a theatrical company touring in the provinces, and though it is true enough that people who know that kind of life find trivial errors here and there, it has to be admitted that on the whole he gave a true and characteristic picture of the outside life of such a community. How a certain class of theatrical people dress and talk, what their work is, and what their outer ways are like,

he has discovered with infinite painstaking; but the fact remains that it is the work of an outsider. He has never once got under the skin of any one of his people, and this is true, because he was impelled to write about them, not because they were human, and therefore endowed with all human characteristics of hatefulness, and lovableness, and quaintness, and humour, and vanity, and jealousy, but because he saw good copy in them. He neither loves nor hates, nor, indeed, except for his own sake, is for a second even faintly interested. He is there to make a book, and these people offer excellent material for a book. He is astonishingly industrious, and his minuteness is without end, but he never warms to his subject. His aim, in short, is one of total artistic selfishness. It is very likely that he would accept this statement of his standpoint, and would justify it as the only standpoint of an artist. But it is answerable for the fact that his pages are sterile of laughter and tears, of sympathy and of pity.

In 'A Modern Lover' and 'A Drama in

Muslin' we find him dealing with a life he knows. He is no longer on ground wholly foreign to him, and it is no longer necessary that he should grope from one uncertain standing place to another, verifying himself by the dark lantern of his note-book as he goes. He moves with a more natural ease, views things with a larger and more comprehensive eye, and has at least that outside sympathy with his people which comes of community of taste and knowledge, and of familiarity with a social *milieu*.

In 'Esther Waters' the earlier characteristics break out again, and break out with greater force than ever. What he calls —with one of those tumbles into foreign idiom which occasionally mark his pages— 'the fever of the gamble' has never been truly diagnosed in English fiction, and the theme is undeniably fertile. He knows absolutely nothing about the manifestations of the disorder, to begin with; but that is of no consequence, for the world is open to observation; and the note-book, the inquiring mind, and the sleuthhound patience are all

as available as ever. Then a combination occurs to him. Servantgalism awaits its painter. The life is picturesque from a certain point of view: it impinges more or less on the lives of all of us, and nobody has hitherto thought it worth while to search into its mysteries, and to tell us what it is really like. He knows nothing at all about this either, but he will make inquiries. He does make inquiries, and they result in a picture which is, on the whole, a piece of surprising accuracy. But still all the fire is for the work. The subject is sought for, the details are gathered, the workman's patience and labour are truly conscientious—at times they excite admiration and surprise—but the net result is lifeless. In the way of waxwork it would be hard to find anything more effective than the people in 'Esther Waters.' They are clothed with an exactitude of detail which would do credit to Madame Tussaud's exhibition in its latest development. They are carefully modelled and coloured and posed. They are capital waxwork, and if the author had only cared

a little bit about them, they might have even that mystic touch of life which thrills us in the finer sorts of fiction. It is eternally true that the wounded is the wounding heart, and the mere descriptive and analytical method not only misses the natural human movement, but it is untrue in its results. Vivisection teaches something, no doubt, but it does not bring a knowledge of the natural animal. To get that knowledge you had better live with him a little, and even love him a little, and teach him to love you. All the scientific inquiry in the world is not worth—in art—one touch of affectionate understanding.

Esther Waters is to go to a lying-in hospital, and thither goes her author before her, bent on what he can picturesquely set down about her surroundings. Her husband is to go to a hospital for consumption. Thither goes the author, and sets down things seen and heard with the wooden, conscientious precision of a bailiff's clerk. The conception of things inquired into seems never to move him to interest, though one is

forced to believe that once, at least, he has narrowly escaped the contagion of a great scene. Esther's illegitimate child is born, and the mother, who has temporarily left him for his own sake, to accept a position as wet-nurse, is inspired by a hungry maternal longing, which drags her irresistibly from warmth and comfort to a poverty whose bitterness has but a single solace—the joy of satisfied motherly love. There are writers who have not a hundredth part of Mr. Moore's industry who would have moved the reader deeply with such a scene. But, if Mr. Moore feels at all, he is ashamed to show it. This mother-hunger is apparently just as affecting a thing to him as the position of the chest of drawers between the two windows —a fact made note of, and, therefore, to be chronicled. Either the writer is content coldly to survey this rage of passion, or he would have us believe he is so; and in either case he misses the mark of the artist, which is, after all, to show such things as he deals with as they truly are, and to seize upon their inwardness. We do not ask for a slavering

flux of sentiment, or an acrobat's display in gesticulation. But, from a gentleman whose corns when trodden on are probably as painful as his neighbours', we are content with something less than a godlike indifference to the emotions of humanity. Let us suppose, charitably, that this is no more than a pretence, and that Mr. Moore is neither at heart so callous nor in vanity so far removed from mere emotional interests as he would seem.

The most patient of investigators in strange regions will make slips sometimes. Mr. Moore, for instance, investigating the racing stable, treats us to a view of a horse whose legs are tightly bandaged from his knees to his forelocks, and his vulgarest peasants and servants say 'that is he,' or 'if it be.' One characteristic of the common speech of our country he has caught with accuracy, though it can scarcely be said that it needed much observation to secure it. The very objectionable word 'bloody,' as it is used by the vulgar, is Mr. Moore's 'stand-

by' in 'Esther Waters.' It is very likely that it takes a sort of daring to introduce the word freely into a work of fiction, but the courage does not seem very much more respectable than the word.

VIII

MR. S. R. CROCKETT—IAN MACLAREN

WHEN I undertook the writing of this series, Mr. S. R. Crockett, except for his 'Mad Sir Uchtred of the Hills,' was unknown to me by actual reading. My opinion of that story was not a high one. I thought it, and on a second reading still think it, feebly pretentious. But for some reason or another Mr. Crockett's name has been buzzed about in such a prodigality of praise that it came natural to believe and hope that later work from his pen had shown a quality which the first little *brochure* had not revealed, and that the world had found in him a genuine addition to its regiment of literary workmen. The curiosity with which a section of the newspaper press has been inspired as to Mr. Crockett's personal whereabouts, as to his comings and

goings, his engagements for the future, and his prices 'per thousand words,' would have seemed to indicate that in him we had discovered a person of considerably more than the average height.

The result of a completer perusal of his writings is not merely destructive of this hope. It is positively stunning and bewildering. Mr. Crockett is not only not a great man, but a rather futile very small one. The unblushing effrontery of those gentlemen of the press who have set *him* on a level with Sir Walter is the most mournful and most contemptible thing in association with the poorer sort of criticism which has been encountered of late years.

It is no part of an honest critic's business to be personally offensive. It is no part of his function to find a pleasure in giving pain. But it is a part of his business, which is not to be escaped, to do his fearless best to tell the truth, and the truth about Mr. Crockett and the press is not to be told without giving deep offence to him and it. Fortunately, the press is a very wide corporation

indeed, and if there are venal people employed upon it, there are at least as many scrupulously honourable; and if there are stupid people who can be carried by a cry, there are men of all grades of brilliant ability, ranging from genius to talent. To put the matter in plain English will offend neither honesty nor ability, and to give offence to venality or incompetence is not an act of peculiar daring.

In plain English, then, it is not a matter of opinion as to whether Mr. Crockett is worthy of the stilted encomium which has mopped and mowed about him. It is not a matter of opinion as to whether Mr. Crockett has or has not rivalled Sir Walter. It is a matter of absolute fact, about which no two men who are even moderately competent to judge can dispute for a second. The newspaper press, or a very considerable section of it, has conspired to set Mr. Crockett upon an eminence so removed from his fitness for it that he is made ridiculous by the mere fact of being perched there. When Robert Louis Stevenson suffered from the

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hysteria of praise, the natural feeling was to save an exquisite artist from the excusable exaltations of enthusiasm. When the genuine art and real fun and touching pathos of Mr. J. M. Barrie hurried his admirers into uncritical ecstasy, one's only fear was lest the popular taste should take an undeserved revenge in coldness and neglect. To say in the first flush of affection and enjoyment that 'A Window in Thrums' is as good as Sir Walter, or that 'The Master of Ballantrae' is better, is not to exercise the faculty of a critic; but it is not monstrous or absurd. It is the expression of a momentary happy ebullience, a natural ejaculation of gratitude for a beautiful gift. It is only when the judgment comes to be persisted in that we find any element of danger in it. It is only when gravely and strenuously repeated, as in Stevenson's case, that it is to be resented, and then mainly on the ground that it does harm to the object of it. But in the case now under review the conditions are not the same. Poor Stevenson, whose early death is still a poignant grief, was indubitably

a man of genius. Settle the question of stature how you may, there is no denying the species to which such a writer belongs. Mr. Barrie *has* genius—which is a slightly different thing. But Mr. Crockett in the great rank of letters is 'as just and mere a serving-man as any born of woman,' and there has been as much banging of the paragraphic drum concerning him, and as assured a proclamation of his mastership, as if every high quality of genius were recognisable in him at a glance. If I knew of any unmistakable and tangible reason for all this I would not hesitate to name it, but I am not in the secret, and I have no right to guess. There are some sort of strings somewhere, and somebody pulls them. So much is evident on the face of things. Who work the contemptible *fantoccini* who gesticulate to the Ephesian hubbub of 'greatness' I neither know nor care, but it is simply out of credence that their motions are spontaneous.

Expede Herculem. I will take a solitary story from Mr. Crockett's 'Stickit Minister.'

It is called 'The Courtship of Allan Fairley.' The tale is of a young minister of the peasant class, whose parents through much privation have kept their son at college. He is elected to a living in an aristocratic parish, and takes his old peasant mother to keep house for him. Some of his more polished parishioners object to the old lady's presence at the manse, and they have the rather astonishing impertinence to propose that the son shall send her away. He refuses, and shows his visitors the door. These are the bare lines of the story so far as we are concerned with it.

Think how Dr. Macdonald or J. M. Barrie would have handled this! The humour of either would have danced round the crass obtuseness of the deputation and the mingled wrath and amusement of the minister. The story bristles with opportunity for the presentation of human contrast. The chances are all there, and a story-teller of anything like genuine faculty could not have failed to see and to utilise some of them. Mr. Crockett misses every conceiv-

able point of his own tale, and with a majestic clumsiness drags in the one thing which could possibly make it offensive. The minister has nothing to fear from his visitors, for it is expressly stated that he has a majority of three hundred and sixty-five in his spiritual constituency of four hundred and thirty-five. But Mr. Crockett's point is that he was a hero for refusing to kick his own mother out of doors. He makes Mr. Allan Fairley tell his own tale, and the end of this portion of it runs thus:

'He got no further; he wadna hae gotten as far if for a moment I had jaloosed his drift. I got on my feet. I could hardly keep my hands off them, minister as I was, but I said: "Gentlemen, you are aware of what you ask me to do? You ask me to turn out of the house the mither that bore me, the mither that learnt me 'The Lord's my Shepherd,' the mither that wore her fingers near the bone that I might gang to the college, that selled her bit plenishin' that my manse micht be furnished! Ye ask me to show her to the door—I'LL SHOW YOU

TO THE DOOR!"—an' to the door they gaed!' "Weel done! That was my ain Allan!" cried I.'

Was there ever a piece of sentiment cheaper, falser, more tawdry? Who applauds a man for not turning his old mother out of doors at the impertinent request of a meddling nobody? Look at the stormy small capitals of this oatmeal hero, who is supposed to electrify us by the mere fact of his not being an incredible ass and scoundrel! Does any sober person think for a moment that a man of genius could have made this revolting blunder? It is beyond comparison the densest bit of stupidity in dealing with the emotions I have encountered anywhere. Anybody but Mr. Crockett can see where the point of the story lies. It lies in the cool impertinence and heartlessness of his visitors. To put the emphasis on the rejection of their proposal—to make a point of *that*—is to insult the reader. Of course it was rejected. How should it possibly, by any stretch of poltroonery and baseness, be otherwise?

Ex pede Herculem. This bedrummed

and betrumpeted man of genius cannot read the A B *ab* of the human emotions. 'Here!' says the subtle tempter, 'I'll give you twopence if you'll put your baby on the fire!' The god-like hero thunders: 'No! He is my flesh and blood. He is the sacred trust of Heaven. He is innocent, he is helpless. I'LL SHOW YOU TO THE DOOR!' Oh! what emotions stir within the heart when a master's hand awakes a chord like this!

There is, of course, a certain angry pleasure in this necessary work; but it does not endure, and it is followed rapidly by a reaction of pain and pity. But we have a right to ask—we have a right to insist—that undeserved reputations shall not be manufactured for us by any clique. We have a right to protest when the offence is open and flagrant. Let it be said, if it be not too late to say it, that Mr. Crockett, if left alone by his indiscreet admirers, or only puffed within the limits of the reasonable, might have been regarded as an honest workman as times go, when everybody, more or less, writes fiction.

If his pages had come before me as the work of an unknown man, seeking his proper place in the paper republic, it is certain that I could have found some honest and agreeable things to say about him. But, unfortunately, he, more than any other writer of his day, has been signalled out for those uncostly extravagances of praise which are fast discrediting us in our own eyes, and are making what should be the art of criticism a mockery, and something of a shame. In what I have written I have dealt less with his work than with the false estimate of it which, for a year or two, has been thrust upon the public by a certain band of writers who are either hopelessly incompetent to assess our labours or incurably dishonest. It is very possible indeed that Mr. Crockett is wholly undeserving of censure in this regard, that he has not in any way asked or aided the manufacture of this balloon of a reputation in which he has been floated to such heights. Apart from the pretensions of his *claque*, there is no earthly reason why a critic should hold him up to ridicule. It is

not he who is ridiculous, but at its best his position is respectable, and he holds his place (like the mob of us who write for a living) for the moment only. To pretend that he is a man of genius, to talk about him in the same breath with Sir Walter Scott, to chronicle his comings and his goings as if he were the embodiment of a new revelation, is to provoke a natural and just resentment. The more plainly that resentment is expressed—the more it is seen that a false adulation is the seed of an open contempt—the less likely writers of middling faculty will be to encourage a bloated estimate of themselves.

[Since the above was written and printed Mr. Crockett has published his story of 'Lads' Love,' the final chapter of which is so good that in reading it I experienced a twinge of regret for the onslaught I had made. But after all it is not the author who is attacked in what goes before, and if, in the fray with the critics, he is, incidentally, as it were, somewhat roughly handled, the over-enthusiasm of his professional admirers

must bear the blame. There is much prentice work in 'Lads' Love,' some strenuously enforced emotion, which is not genuine, and a congenital misunderstanding of the essential difference between tedium and humour; but if the whole of Mr. Crockett's work had reached its level, the protest against his reviewers would have stood in need of modification.]

Mr. Ian Maclaren, though he is distinctly an imitator, and may be said to owe his literary existence to Mr. J. M. Barrie, is both artistic and sympathetic. His work conveys to the reader the impression of an encounter with Barrie in a dream. The keen edges of the original are blurred and partly lost, but the author of 'Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush' has many excellent qualities, and if he had had the good fortune or the initiative to be first in the field, his work would have been almost wholly charming. As it is, he still shows much faculty of intuition and of heart, and his work is all sympathetically honest. His emotions are genuine, and this in the creation of emotional

fiction is the first essential to success. Here is another case where the hysteric overpraise of the critics has done a capable workman a serious injustice, and but for it a candid reviewer could have no temptation towards blame. His inspiration is from the outside, but that is the harshest word that can honestly be spoken, and in days when literature has become a trade such a judgment is not severe.

IX

DR. MACDONALD AND MR. J. M. BARRIE

WHEN one calls to mind the rapid and extensive popularity achieved by the latest school of Scottish dialect writers, one is tempted to wonder a little at the comparative neglect which has befallen a real master of that *genre*, who is still living and writing, and who began his work within the memory of the middle-aged. With the single exception of 'A Window in Thrums,' none of the new books of this school are worthy to be compared with 'David Elginbrod,' or 'Alec Forbes of Howglen,' or 'Robert Falconer.' Yet not one of them has failed to find a greater vogue or to bring to its author a more swelling reputation than Dr. Macdonald achieved. Perhaps the reasons for these facts are not far to seek. To begin at the beginning, Sir Walter, who created the

Scottish character novel, had made, in other fields, a reputation quite unparalleled in the history of fiction before he took broadly to the use of Scottish rural idiom, and the depiction of Scottish character in its peculiarly local aspects. The magic of his name compelled attention, and his genius gave a classic flavour to dialects until then regarded as barbarous and ugly. The flame of Burns had already eaten all grossness out of the rudest rusticities, and in the space of twenty years at most the Auld Braid Scots wore the dignity of a language and was decorated with all the honours of a literature. But this, in spite of the transcendent genius of the two men to whom northern literature owes its greatest debt, brought about very little more than a local interest and a local pride. Scott was accepted in spite of the idiom which he sometimes employed, and not because of it, and one can only laugh at the fancy presented to the mind by the picture of an English or a foreign reader who for the first time found himself confronted by Mrs. Bartlemy Saddletree's query

to her maid: 'What gart ye busk your cockernony that gait?' To this hour, indeed, there are thousands of Scott's admirers for whom the question might just as well be framed in Sanscrit.

In Sir Walter's own day and generation he had one considerable imitator in Galt, whose 'Andrew Wylie of that Ilk' and 'The Entail' can still afford pleasure to the reader. Then for a time the fiction of Scottish character went moribund. The prose Muse of the North was silent, or spoke in ineffectual accents. After a long interregnum came George Macdonald, unconsciously paving the way for the mob of northern gentlemen who now write with ease. He brought to his task an unusual fervour, a more than common scholarship, a more than common richness, purity, and flexibility in style, a truly poetic endowment of imagination, and a truly human endowment of sympathy, intuition, and insight. It would be absurd to say that he failed, but it is certain that he scarcely received a tithe either of the praise or the pudding which have fallen to

the share of Mr. S. R. Crockett, for example, who is no more to be compared with him than I to Hercules. Such readers as were competent to judge of him ranked him high, but, south of the Tweed, such readers were few and far between, for he employed the idiomatic Scotch in which he chose to work with a remorseless accuracy, and in this way set up for himself a barrier against the average Englishman. His genius, charming as it was, was not of that tremendous and compulsive sort which lays a hand on every man, and makes the breaking down of such a barrier an essential to intellectual happiness. There was a tacit admission that he was, in his measure, a great man, but that the average reader could afford to let him alone. And then, things were very different with the press. The northern part of this island, though active in press life, had nothing like its influence of to-day. To-day the press of Great Britain swarms with Scotchmen, and the 'boom' which has lately filled heaven and earth with respect to the achievements of the new Scotch school has

given ample and even curious evidence of that fact. The spoils to the victor, by all means. We folk from over the border are a warlike and a self-approving race, with a strong family instinct, and a passionate love for the things which pertain to our own part of the world. If Scotchmen had been as numerous amongst pressmen as they are to-day, and as certain of their power, they would have boomed Dr. Macdonald beyond a doubt. Such recognition as he received came mainly from them. But if only the present critical conditions had existed in his early day, with what garlands would he have been wreathed, what sacrifices would have been made before him!

Apart from that rugged inaccessibility of dialect (to the merely English reader) which so often marks Dr. Macdonald's work, there is in the main theme of his best books a reason why he should not be widely popular. The one issue in which he is most passionately interested is theological. He has been to many a Moses in the speculative desert, leading to a land of promise. He has

preached with a tender and persuasive fire the divine freedom of the soul, and its essential oneness with the Fatherhood of God. He has expended many beautiful faculties on this work, and his influence in the broadening and deepening of religious thought in Scotland is not to be denied. But his insistence on this great theme has naturally scared away the empty-headed and the shallow-hearted, and many also of the careless clever. There must be somewhere a fund of sincerity and of reason in the reader to whom he appeals. There is a public which is prepared to encounter thought, which can be genuinely stirred by a high intellectual passion, which is athirst indeed for that highest and best enjoyment, but it is numerically small, and the writer who deals mainly with spiritual problems, and who, in doing so, is reticent and reverent, can scarcely hope to draw the mob at his wheels. In each of his three best books, Dr. Macdonald has traced the growth of a soul towards freedom. His conception of freedom is a reasoned but absolute sub-

mission to a Divine Will; a sense of absorption in the manifest intent of a guiding Power which is wholly loving and wholly wise. To all who are able to read him he is exquisitely interesting and delightful, and to some he appeals with the authority of a prophet and divinely-appointed guide. Along with this experience of abiding faith in him goes a dash of mysticism, of pantheism. He is essentially a poet, and had he chosen to expend more labour upon his verse he might have risen to high rank on that side. But with him the thing to be said has seemed vastly more important than the way of saying it, and he has, perhaps rightly, disdained to be laborious in the mere texture of his verse. It is rational to argue that if the poetic inspiration is not vital enough to find an immediate expression it is not true enough to make it worth while to remould and recast it. It would seem—judging by results—that Dr. Macdonald's conception of a lyric is of something wholly spontaneous. Be this as it may, the poetic cast of his mind is revealed in his prose with greater freedom

and a completer charm than in his verse. The best of him is the atmosphere he carries. It is not possible to read his books and not to know him for a brave, sincere, and loyal man, large both in heart and brain, and they purify and tone the mind in just such fashion as the air of mountain, moor, or sea purifies and tones the body.

The worthiest of his successors is Mr. J. M. Barrie, who has much in common with him, though he displays differences of a very essential kind. Mr. Barrie has no such spiritual obsession as besets his elder. He has the national reverence for sacred things, but it is probably rather habitual and racial than dogmatic. I think his greatest charm lies in the fact that he is at once old and new fashioned. He loves to deal with a bygone form of life, a form of life which he is too young to remember in all its intricacies, whilst he is not too young to have heard of it plenteously at first hand, or to have known many of its exemplars. Few things of so happy a sort can befall a child of imagination as to be born on such a borderland of time. About

him is the atmosphere of the new, and dotted every here and there around him are the living mementoes of the old—a dying age, which in a little while will cease to be, and is already out of date and romantic. Steam and electricity and the printing-press, and the universal provider and the cheap clothing 'emporium,' have worked strange changes. It was Mr. Barrie's fortune to begin to look on life when all these changes were not yet wrought; to bring an essentially modern mind to bear on the contemplation of a vanishing and yet visible past, to live with the quaint, yet to be able, by mere force of contrast, to recognise its quaintness, and to be in close and constant and familiar touch with those to whom the disappearing forms of life had been wholly habitual. That the mere environment thus indicated was the lot of hundreds of thousands makes little difference to the especial happiness of the chance, for, as I have said already, we can't all be persons of genius, and it is only to the man of genius that the good fortune comes home.

If there is one truth in relation to the craft of fiction of which I am more convinced than another, it is that all the genuine and original observation of which a man is capable is made in very early life. There are two very obvious reasons why this should be so. The fact that they are obvious need not prevent me from stating them here, since I am not writing for those who make a business of knowing such things. In the first place, the mind is at its freshest; and all objects within its scope have a keen-edged interest, which wears away in later life. In the next place, the earliest observations are our own, unmixed with the conclusions and prepossessions of other minds. A child has not learnt the Dickens fashion, or the Thackeray fashion, or the Superior Person fashion of surveying particulars and generals. He has not begun to obscure his intelligence by the vicious habit of purposed note-takings for literary uses. He looks at the things which interest him simply, naturally, and with entire absorption. It is true of the most commonplace people that as they grow

old their minds turn back to childhood, and they remember the things of half a century ago with more clearness than the affairs of last week. Lord Lytton's definition of a man of genius was that he preserved the child's capacity for wonder.

One of the astutest of living critics tells me that he finds a curiously *logical* characteristic in Mr. Barrie's humour, but I confess that I am not wholly clear as to his meaning. I find it characteristically Scotch, and perhaps at bottom we mean the same thing. It is often sly, and so conscious in its enjoyment of itself as to be content to remain unseen. Often it lies in a flavour of the mind, as in whole pages of 'My Lady Nicotine,' where it is a mere placid, lazy acquiescence in the generally humorous aspect of things. Here the writer finds himself amused, and so may you if you happen to be in the mood. At other times the fun bubbles with pure spontaneity, as in the courtship of 'Tnowhead's Bell, which is, I make bold to believe, as good a bit of Scotch rural comedy as we have had for many a day. The comedy is

broad, and touches the edge of farce at times, but it is always kept on the hither-side by its droll appreciation of character, and an air of complete gravity in the narrator, who, for any indication he gives to the contrary, might be dealing with the most serious of chronicles.

As I write I have before me a letter of Mr. Barrie's, written to a fellow-workman, in which he speaks of the 'almost unbearable pathos' of an incident in one of the latter's pages. The phrase seems to fit accurately that chapter in the 'Window in Thrums' where Jamie, after his fall in London, returns to his old home, and finds his own people dead and scattered. The story is simple, and the style is severe even to dryness, but every word is like a nail driven home. It would be hard to find in merely modern work a chapter written with a more masterly economy of means than this. And this economy of means, is the most striking characteristic of Mr. Barrie's literary style. It is as different from the forced economy of poverty as the wordy extravagance of Miss

Corelli is different from the exuberance of Shakspeare. It is a reasoned, laborious, and self-chastening art, and within its own limitations it is art at its acme of achievement. What it has set itself to do it has done.

These two, then, Dr. George Macdonald and Mr. J. M. Barrie, are the men who worthily carry on, in their separate and distinct fashions, the tradition which Sir Walter established. In a summary like this, where it is understood that at least a loyal effort is being made to recognise and apportion the merits of rival writers, the task of the critic occasionally grows ungrateful. Nothing short of sheer envy can grudge to Mr. Barrie a high meed of praise, but I think that his elder is his better. The younger man's distinction is very largely due to a fine self-command, a faculty of self-criticism, which in its way cannot easily be overpraised. He has not Stevenson's exquisite and yet daring appropriateness in the choice of words, but his humour is racier and scarcely less delicate, and in passages of pathos he knows his way straight

to the human heart. As the invention or discovery of new themes grows day by day less easy—as the bounds of the story-teller's personal originality are constantly narrowing—the purely literary faculty, the mere craft of authorship in its finer manifestations must of necessity grow more valuable. Mr. Barrie is a captain amongst workmen, and there is little fear that in the final judgment of the public and his peers he will be huddled up with Maclarens and Crocketts, as he sometimes is to-day. But Dr. Macdonald, though he has not sought for the finenesses of mere literary art with an equal jealousy, has inherited a bigger fortune, and has spent his ownings with a larger hand. He has perhaps narrowed his following by his faithfulness to his own inspiration, but his books are a genuine benefaction to the heart, and no man can read them honestly without drawing from them a spiritual freshness and purity of the rarer sort. There is an old story of a discussion among the students of their time as to the relative merits of Schiller and Goethe. The dispute came to

Schiller's ears, and he laughingly advised the combatants to cease discussion, and to be thankful that they had both. I could take a personal refuge there with all pleasure, but the critical rush to crown the new gods is a new thing, and, without stealing a leaf from the brow of the younger writer, I should like to see a fresher and a brighter crown upon the head of his elder and bigger brother.

X

THE PROBLEM SEEKERS—SEA CAPTAIN AND LAND CAPTAIN

It is so long a time since Mr. W. H. Mallock published the 'Romance of the Nineteenth Century' that the book might now very well be left alone, if it were not for the fact that in a fashion it marked an epoch in the history of English literature. It was, so far as I know, the first example of the School of the Downright Nasty. For half a year it ran in 'Belgravia' side by side with a novel of my own, and under those conditions I read as much as I could stand of it. Its main object appears to be to establish the theory that a young woman of refined breeding may be an amateur harlot. The central male figure of the book is a howling bounder, who has a grievance against the universe because he can't entirely understand it. Within the last

two or three years it has occurred to Mr. Mallock to recast the book, and in a preface dated 1893 (I think) he informs the world that on re-reading the story he personally has found portions of it to be offensive. These portions he declares himself to have eliminated, and he now thinks—or thought in 1893—that there is nothing on that score to cavil at. All I remembered of the story was that a certain Colonel Stapleton debauched the mind of the heroine by lending her obscene books with obscene prints attached. This episode is retained, in spite of the work of purification which has been performed; and it may be said that if the original novel were nastier than this deodorised edition of it, it is very much of a wonder how the critical stomach kept it down.

It is a refreshment to turn from this particular problem seeker to the work of a writer like Mrs. Humphry Ward, who, if she invests the questions she handles with more importance than actually belongs to them, is as wholesome and sincere as one could ask. She has read both deeply and widely, she

thinks with sanity and clearness, she discerns character, she can create and tell a story, her style is excellently succinct and full, and any book from her pen may safely be guaranteed to fill many charmed and thoughtful hours. She is still a seeker of problems, and shares the faults of her school, inasmuch as she sets herself to the solution of themes which all thoughtful people have solved for themselves at an early age. It would be difficult, perhaps, to find a better and more salutary stimulant for the mind of a very young man or woman than 'Robert Elsmere,' to cite but one work of hers, but to the adult intelligence she seems a day behind the fair. She expends something very like genius in establishing a truth which is only doubted by here and there a narrow bigot—that truth being that a man may find himself forced to abandon the bare dogma of religion, and may yet conserve his faith in the Unseen and his spiritual brotherhood with men. 'Robert Elsmere' is a very beautiful piece of work, and it is impossible not to respect the ardour which inspires it, and the many literary excellences by which

it is distinguished. But, all the same, it leaves upon the mind a sense of some futility. It would be easy to write a story which would prove—if a story can be imagined to prove anything—the precise opposite of the truth so eloquently preached in 'Robert Elsmere,' and the tale might be perfectly true to the experience of life. There are men who, parting with dogmatic religion, part with religion altogether, and whose only chance of salvation from themselves lies in the acceptance of a hard and fast creed. It would be easy enough, and true enough, to show such a man assailed by doubt, struggling and succumbing, and then going headlong to the devil. The thing has happened many a time. Mrs. Humphry Ward shows another kind of man, and depicts him most ably. Robert Elsmere is even a better Christian when he has surrendered his creed than he was whilst he held it, for he has reached to a loftier ideal of life, and he dies as a martyr to its duties. But the story has the air of being controversial, and fiction and controversy do not work well together. It is possible to

establish any theory, so far as a single instance will do it, when you have the manufacture both of facts and of characters in your own hands. Accept an extreme case. A practised novelist might take in hand the character of a morose and surly fellow who was generous and expansive in his cups. So long as the wretch was sober he might be made hateful; half fill him with whisky, and you gift him with all manner of emotional good qualities. The study might be real enough, but it would prove nothing. The novelist who assails a controversial question begs everything, and the answer to a problem so posed is worthless except as the expression of an individual opinion. It may be urged—and there is force in the contention—that there are many people who are only induced to think of serious themes when they are dressed in the guise of fiction, as there are people who cannot take pills unless they are sugar-coated. Again—as admitted already—a mind in process of formation might be strengthened and broadened by the influence of such a book as 'Robert Elsmere.' There are some

to whom its apparent trend of thought will appear to be simply damnable. That one may have scant respect for their judgment, and no share at all in their opinion, does not alter the fact that the weapon employed against them is not and cannot be fairly used.

Many years ago, Mr. Clark Russell, whose name is now a household word, was the editor of an ill-fated society journal. I was a contributor to its little-read pages, and I came one day upon an article entitled 'Pompa Mortis.' This article was written in such astonishingly good English, so clean, so hard-bitten and terse, and yet so graceful, that I could not resist the temptation to ask its author's name. My editor modestly acknowledged it for his own, and when I told him what I thought of its style he confessed to a close study of Defoe and a great admiration for him. I saw nothing more from his hand until I read 'The Wreck of the Grosvenor,' the first of that series of sea stories which has carried Mr. Russell's name about the world. An armchair voyage with Russell is almost

as good as the real thing, and sometimes (as when the perils and distresses of shipwreck are in question) a great deal better. Had any man ever such an eye for the sea before, or such a power of bringing it to the sight of another? Few readers, I fancy, care a copper for his fable, or very much for his characters, except for the mere moment when they move in the page; but his descriptions of sky and sea linger in the mind like things actually seen. They are so sharp, so vivid, so detailed, so true, that a marine painter might work from them. And the really remarkable thing about them is the infinite variety of these seascapes and skyscapes. He seems never to repeat himself. He is various as the seas and skies he paints. One figures his mind as some sort of marvellous picture gallery. He veritably sees things, and he makes the reader see them. And all the strange and curious sea jargon, of which not one landsman in a thousand understands anything—combings and back-stays and dead-eyes, and the rest of it—takes a salt smack of romance in his lips. He can be as tech-

nical as he pleases, and the reader takes him on faith, and rollicks along with him, bewildered, possibly, but trusting and happy. And Clark Russell has not only been charming. He has been useful, too, and Foc'sle Jack owes him a debt of gratitude. For though he does not shine as a draughtsman where the subtleties of character are concerned, he knows Jack, who is not much of a metaphysical puzzle, inside and out, and he has brought him home to us as no sea-writer ever tried to do before. Years ago it seemed natural to fancy that he might write himself out, but he goes on with a freshness which looks inexhaustible. If I cannot read him with the old enjoyment it is my misfortune and not his fault. If his latest book had been his first I should have found in it the charm which caught me years ago. But it is in the nature of things that an individual writer like Clark Russell should be his own most dangerous rival.

Clark Russell is captain on his own deck, whether he sail a coffin or a princely India-

man of the old time. Sir Walter Besant is lord of his own East End, and of that innocent seraglio of delightful and eccentric young ladies to which he has been adding for years past. Sir Walter Besant is chiefly remarkable as an example of what may be done by a steadfast cheerfulness in style. His creed has always been that fiction is a recreative art, and we have no better sample of a manly and stout-hearted optimist than he. He is optimistic of set purpose, and sometimes his cheerfulness costs him a struggle, for he is tender-hearted and clear-sighted, and he is the Columbus of 'the great joyless city' of the East. He has had a double aim—to keep his work recreative and to make it useful. In one respect he has been curiously happy, for he once dreamt aloud a beautiful dream, and has lived to find it a reality. It was his own bright hope which built the People's Palace, and a man might rest on that with ample satisfaction.

He has given us many well-studied types of character, but he excels in the portraiture of the manly young man and the lovable

young woman. In this regard I find him at his apogee with Phyllis Fleming and Jack Dunquerque, who are both frankly alive and charming. He is good, too, at the portraiture of a humbug, and finds a humorous delight in him, very much as Dickens did. There is more than a touch of Dickens in his method, and in his way of seeing people, and, most of all, in the warm-hearted cheer he keeps.

It is outside the purpose of this series to dwell on anything but the literary value of the works of the people dealt with; but little apology, after all, is needed for a side-glance at the work which Sir Walter Besant has done for men of letters. He has worked hard at the vexed and difficult question of copyright; he has founded an Authors' Club and an authors' newspaper; and he has devoted with marked unselfishness much valuable time and effort to the general well-being of the craft. He has stood out stoutly for the State recognition of authorship, and in his own person he has received it. *Esprit de corps* is a capital thing in its way. Whether

it is well to have too much of it in a body of men who hold the power of the Press largely in their own hands, whilst at the same time publicity is the breath of their nostrils, is perhaps an open question. But of Sir Walter Besant's single-mindedness in this voluntary work there is no shadow of doubt. Remembering his popularity with the public, and the price he can command for his work, it is evident that he has expended in the pursuit of his ideal time which would have been worth some thousands of pounds to him. He has striven in all ways to do honour to letters, and the esteem in which he is held is a just payment for high purpose and unselfish labour.

XI

MISS MARIE CORELLI

In an article intended for this series and set under this lady's name (an article now suppressed, and therefore to be re-written), I fell into an error which appears to have been shared by several of the critics who dealt with what was then the latest of her books, 'The Sorrows of Satan.' I assumed Miss Corelli to have drawn her own portrait, as she sees things, in the character of 'Mavis Clare.' This belief has been expressed—so it turns out—by other people, and I learn that Miss Corelli has authoritatively denied it. 'She objects very strongly,' so says an inspired defender, 'to a notion which was started by one of the most distinguished of her interviewers, and absolutely denies the assertion that she described herself as "Mavis Clare" in "The Sorrows of Satan."' Miss

Corelli, of course, knows the truth about this matter, and nobody else can possibly know it, but it is at least permissible to examine the evidence which led many separate people to the same false conclusion. 'Mavis Clare' and Marie Corelli own the same initials, and until the fact that this was a mere fortuitous chance was made clear by Miss Corelli herself it seemed natural to suppose that an identity was coyly hinted at. 'Mavis Clare' is a novelist, and so is Miss Corelli. 'Mavis Clare' is *mignonne* and fair, 'is pretty, and knows how to dress besides,' is a 'most independent creature, too; quite indifferent to opinions.' All these things, as we learn from many sources, are true of Miss Corelli also. It is said of Miss Corelli herself that 'dauntless courage, a clear head, and a tremendous power of working hard without hurting herself have helped her to make a successful use of her great gift. She is not afraid of anything. She "insists on herself," and is unique.' It is to be noted that all this is said by Miss Corelli of 'Mavis Clare.' Miss Corelli is at war with the reviewers. So is

'Mavis Clare.' Miss Corelli's books circulate by the thousand. So do 'Mavis Clare's.' 'Mavis Clare' is utterly indifferent to outside opinion. So is Miss Corelli. In point of fact, if anybody thought Miss Corelli a woman of astonishing genius, and wrote an honest account of her, he would describe her precisely as Miss Corelli has described 'Mavis Clare.'

There is, in fact, a point up to which 'Mavis Clare' and Miss Corelli are not to be separated. There are a score of things in any description of the one which are indubitably true of the other. But when Miss Corelli writes of 'Mavis Clare' in such terms as are now to be quoted we begin to see that she is and must be indignant at the supposition that she is still writing of herself: 'She is too popular to need reviews. Besides, a large number of the critics—the "log-rollers" especially—are mad against her for her success, and the public know it. Clearness of thought, brilliancy of style, beauty of diction—all these are hers, united to consummate ease of expression and artistic skill. The

potent, resistless, unpurchasable quality of Genius. She wrote what she had to say with a gracious charm, freedom, and innate consciousness of strength. She won fame without the aid of money, and was crowned so brightly and visibly before the world that she was beyond criticism.'

But is it not just within the bounds of possibility that Miss Corelli began with some idea of depicting herself, and, discarding that idea, took too little care to obliterate resemblances? Even here she trenches too closely upon the truth to escape the calumnious supposition that she is writing of herself. She *is* too popular to need reviews. She is at war with the critics, and she has induced a very large portion of the public to believe that 'a number of the critics—the "log-rollers" especially—are mad against her for her success.'

Were I, the present writer, to invent a fictional character, to give him for the initials of his name the letters D. C. M., to describe him as awkward and burly, with an untidy head of grey hair, to make him a novelist, a

Bohemian and a wanderer, and then to paint him as a man of genius and an astonishing fine fellow, I should expect to be told that I had been guilty of a grave insolence. If I could honestly say that the resemblances had never struck me, and that the egregious vanity of the picture was a wholly imaginary thing, I should, of course, desire to be believed, and I should, of course, deserve to be believed. But I should encounter doubt, and I should not be disposed to wonder at it. If I were annoyed with anybody I should be annoyed with myself for having given such a handle to the world's ill-nature.

Accepting Miss Corelli's disclaimer, one is still forced to the conclusion that she has fallen into a serious indiscretion.

In 'The Murder of Delicia' we are made acquainted with another lady-writer who enjoys all the popularity of Miss Corelli and of 'Mavis Clare,' who has the genius and the eyes and the stature and the hair of both. 'As a writer she stood quite apart from the rank and file of modern fictionists.' 'The public responded to her

voice, and clamoured for her work, and as a natural result of this, all ambitious and aspiring publishers were her very humble suppliants. Whatsoever munificent and glittering terms are dreamed of by authors in their wildest conceptions of a literary El Dorado were hers to command; and yet she was neither vain nor greedy.' One thanks God piously that yet she was neither vain nor greedy; but one can't keep the mouth from watering. Ah! those wildest conceptions of a literary El Dorado! 'Delicia' gets 8,000*l.* for a book. May it be delicately hinted that this sum is only approached in the receipts of one living lady-writer, and that the lady-writer's name is ——? Wild horses shall not drag this pen further.

Miss Corelli complains, in a preface to this recent work, that 'every little halfpenny ragamuffin of the press that can get a newspaper corner in which to hide himself for the convenience of throwing stones,' pelts every 'brilliant woman' with the word 'unsexed.' Honestly, I don't remember the

reproach being hurled at Mrs. Browning, or George Eliot, or Mrs. Cowden Clarke, or Charlotte Brontë, or Maria Edgeworth, or Mrs. Hemans. Miss Corelli tells us that the woman who is 'well-nigh stripped to man's gaze every night,' and who 'drinks too much wine and brandy,' is not subjected to this reproach, whilst if another woman 'prefers to keep her woman's modesty, and execute some great work of art which shall be as good or even better than anything man can accomplish, she will be dubbed "unsexed" instantly.' Where has Miss Corelli found the society of which these amazing things are true? Does anybody else know it? And where are the better works of art from woman's hand than man can accomplish? 'Aurora Leigh' and the Portuguese Sonnets are at the top of feminine achievement, and Shakespeare is not dethroned. And here is a pearl of common sense: 'To put it bluntly and plainly, a great majority of the men of the present day want women to keep them.' This is Miss Corelli in her own person in

her preface, and, 'to put it bluntly and plainly,' the statement is not true, or approximately true, or within shouting distance of the truth. And what of the 'persons of high distinction who always find something curiously degrading in paying their tradesmen'? Are they commoner than persons of high distinction who meet their bills? Are they as common? Miss Corelli sweeps the board. She is angry because some people will not take her seriously, but whilst her pages are charged with this kind of matter, she cannot fairly blame anybody but herself. She burns to be a social reformer. It would be unjust to deny her ardour. But when she tells the tale of a penniless nobleman who lives on his wife's money and breaks her heart, and assures us that 'there are thousands of such cases every day,' she undoes her own sermon by one rampant phrase of nonsense There are such men, more's the pity, and they are the social satirist's honest game There have been foolish people who thought that women unsexed themselves by doing

artistic work, but they died many years ago, for the most part. There are men who want to marry rich women, and live lazy lives, but they are not 'a great majority.' Miss Corelli knows these things, of course, for they are patent to the world; but she allows zeal to run away with judgment. The rules for satire are the rules for Irish stew. You mustn't *empty* the pepper-castor, and the pot should be kept at a gentle bubble only. There is reason in the profitable denunciation of a wicked world, as well as in the roasting of eggs.

But Miss Corelli has hit the public hard, and it is the self-imposed task of the present writer to find out, as far as in him lies, why and how she has done this. Miss Corelli's force is hysteric, but it is sometimes very real. A self-approving hysteria can do fine things under given conditions. It has been the motive power in some work which the world has rightly accepted as great. In the execution of certain forms of emotional art it is a positive essential. Much genuine poetry has been produced under its influence. It

is a sort of spiritual wind, which, rushing through the harp-strings of the soul, *may* make an extraordinary music. But the sounds produced depend not upon the impulse conveyed to the instrument, but on the quality and condition of the instrument itself. Without the impulse a large and various mind may lie quiescent. With the impulse a small and disordered spirit may make a very considerable sound. In the very loftiest flights of genius we discern a sort of glorious dementia. All readers have found it in the last splendid verse of 'Adonaïs.' It proclaims itself in Keats in the wild *naïveté* of the inquiry, 'Muse of my native land, am I inspired?' The faculty of the very greatest among the great lies in the existence of this inrush of emotion, in strict subordination to the intellectual powers. To be without it precludes greatness; to be wholly subject to its influence is to be insane. Miss Corelli experiences the inrush of emotion in great force, but, unfortunately for her work, and for herself, the sense of power which it inspires is not co-ordinate with the

strength of intellect which is essential to its control.

Miss Corelli has ventured freely into the domain of spiritual things, and has dealt, with more daring than knowledge, with esoteric mysteries. The great reading public knows little of these matters, because, as a rule, they have been expressed by writers whose works are too abstruse to catch the popular ear. It is only when they are handled by writers of imaginative fiction that they become popularly known at all. In 'The Sorrows of Satan' Miss Corelli has earned a reputation for originality by advancing a theory which is older than many of the hills. It has been for ages a rooted religious belief, but it is wholly in conflict with the theological ideas which are taught in our churches and chapels, and has, therefore, a startling air of strangeness to the average church and chapel-goer.

The theory is thus expressed in Mr. C. G. Harrison's lectures on 'The Transcendental Universe': 'It is generally supposed that Satan is the enemy of spirituality in

man; that he delights in his degradation, and views with diabolical satisfaction the development of his lower nature and all its evil consequences. The wide, and almost universal, prevalence of this mediæval superstition only makes it all the more necessary to protest against it as a grotesque error. . . . It would probably be much nearer the truth to say that the degradation and suffering of mankind, for which the adversary of God is responsible, so far from affording him any satisfaction, afflict him with a sense of failure and deepen his despair of ultimate victory.'

This is, of course, the root idea of 'The Sorrows of Satan,' and if the theme had been handled with reserve and dignity a very noble book indeed might without doubt have been built upon it. But Miss Corelli has not had the power to confine herself within the limits of the severe and lofty conception of the old Theosophists. Her sorrowful Satan grows first melodramatic and then absurd. The notion that the great sad adversary of Almighty Goodness is settled in a modern London hotel, with a private cook of his

own, and a privately engaged bath of his own, carries the reader away from the original conception to the burlesque—vulgar and flagrant—of the mystery-plays of the Middle Ages; and the devotion of supernatural power to the preparations for a suburban garden-party is purely ludicrous. Miss Corelli has seized the Theosophic thought, which in itself is far nobler and more poetic than the Miltonic, but she has not been strong enough to use it. She has fallen under the weight of her chosen theme, and the result is that her demoniac hero is at one time presented as a majestic and suffering spirit, and at another as a mere Merry Andrew.

The curious and instructive part of all this is that, if Miss Corelli had been gifted with any power of self-criticism, her ardour would have been damped, and any work she might have done would have suffered proportionately. Her work has hit the public hard, and it has done so because, of its kind, her inspiration has been genuine. The wind does not blow through the strings of a well-ordered instrument, but *it*

blows, and however grotesque the sound produced may sometimes be, it is of a sort which is not to be produced by any mere mechanism of the mind. To the critical ear the tunes played in 'Wormwood' and 'The Sorrows of Satan' are not, and cannot be, agreeable. The writer, to speak in plain English, and without the obscurity of symbols, is the owner of genius on the emotional side, and is not the owner of genius, or anything approaching to it, even from afar, on the intellectual side. The result of this disproportion between impulse and power is, to the critical mind, disastrous; but it does not so make itself felt with the ordinary reader. It is rather an unusual thing with him to come into contact with a real force in books. He has not read or thought enough to know that the ideas offered to him with such transcendental pomp are old and commonplace. It is enough for him to feel that the writer understands herself to be a personage.

She succeeds in imposing herself upon the public because she has first been con-

vinced of her own authority. Her inward conviction of the authority of her own message and her own power to deliver it is the one qualification which makes her different from the mob of writing ladies. Even when she deals with purely social themes the same air of overwhelming earnestness sits upon her brow. In a little trifle published in the November of 1896, and entitled 'Jane,' she goes to work with a quite prophetic ardour to tell a story almost identical with that related in a scrap of Thackeray's 'Cox's Diary.' The reader may find the tale in the second chapter of that brief work, where it is headed 'First Rout.' Thackeray tells his version of it with a sense of fun and humour. Miss Corelli tells hers with the voice and manner of a Boanerges. Nothing is to be done without the divine afflatus, and plenty of it. The temperamental difference between the satirist and the scold is well illustrated by a large handling and a little handling of the same theme.

The point upon which it seems worth

while to insist is this: That the mass of the reading public is always ready to submit itself to the influence of sincerity. It does not seem much to matter what inner characteristics the sincerity may have. In the case now under analysis the quality seems to resolve itself into pure self-confidence. Miss Corelli's method of capturing the public mind is not a trick which anybody else might copy. It is the result of a real, though perilous, gift of nature—a gift which she possesses in something of a superlative degree. Nobody could pretend to such a gift and succeed by virtue of the pretence. Miss Corelli is, at least, quite serious in the belief that she is a woman of genius. She is only very faintly touched with doubt when she thinks that the people who are laughing at her are writhing with envy. She speaks, therefore, with precisely that air of authority to which she would have a right if her ideas with regard to her own mental power were based on solid fact.

So far we arrive at little more than the long-established truth that the unthinking

portion of the public is not only longing for a moral guide, but is ready to accept anybody who is conscious of authority. It would be well if we could leave Miss Corelli here, but something remains to be said which is not altogether pleasant to say. In 'The Sorrows of Satan' many pages are devoted to the bitter (and merited) abuse of certain female writers who deal coarsely with the sexual problem. But Miss Corelli appears to think that she may be as frankly disagreeable as she pleases so long as she is conscious of a moral purpose. Whatever she may feel, and whatever estimable purposes may guide her, she has published many things which run side by side with her denunciation of her sister writers, and are as offensive as anything to be found in the work of any living woman. Take as a solitary example the following passage:

'I soon found that Lucio did not intend to marry, and I concluded that he preferred to be the lover of many women, instead of the husband of one. I did not love him any the less for this; I only resolved that I

would at least be one of those who were happy enough to share his passion. I married the man Tempest, feeling that, like many women I knew, I should, when safely wedded, have greater liberty of action. I was aware that most modern men prefer an amour with a married woman to any other kind of *liaison*, and I thought Lucio would have readily yielded to the plan I had preconceived.'

I do not know of any passage in any of the works so savagely assaulted by Miss Corelli which goes beyond this; and I think it the more, and not the less, objectionable, because the lady who wrote it can see so very plainly how sinful her offence is when it is committed by other people.

XII

THE AMERICANS

I SUPPOSE it will not be disputed that the glory of a nation's literature lies in the fact that it is national—that it reflects truly the spirit and the life of the people with whom it is concerned, by whom it is written, and to whom it belongs. It will not be denied either that this final splendour has not yet descended on the literature of America. The happy and tonic optimism of Emerson is a gift which could hardly have been bestowed upon any man in an old country. It belongs to a land and a time of boundless aspiration and of untired youth, and in virtue of this possession Emerson is amongst the most characteristically American of Americans. In the walks of fiction, with which alone we have to deal in these pages, the Americans have been distinctively English in

spirit and in method (until within recent years), even when they have dealt with themes chosen from their own surroundings.

There is nowhere in the world, and never was until now, and possibly never again will be, such another field for the born student of human nature as is afforded by the United States at this time. The world has never seen such an intimate mixture of racial elements as may be found there. A glance at the Newspaper Directory shows the variety and extent of the foreign elements which, though in rapid process of absorption, are as yet undigested. Hundreds on hundreds on hundreds of journals minister to the daily and weekly needs of Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, Norwegians, Swedes, Russians, Hungarians. There are Polish newspapers, and Armenian, and Hebrew, and Erse and Gaelic. Sleepy old Spain is rubbing shoulders with the eager and energetic races of Maine and New York and Massachusetts. The negro element is everywhere, and the Chinese add a flavour of their own to the *olla podrida*. So far

no American writers of fiction have seen America in the large. Bits of it have been presented with an admirable art; but as yet the continent awaits its Dickens, its Balzac, its Shakespeare, or its Zola.

Mr. Bret Harte has made California his own, but it is not the California of to-day. 'Gone is that camp, and wasted all its fire,' but the old life lives in some of its pages still, and will find students for a long time to come. He has given us three, perhaps, of the best short stories in the world, and a man who has done so much has a right to gratitude and goodwill. Possibly there never was a writer who gave the world all the essentials personal to his art so early, and yet so long survived in the race for popularity. Bret Harte's first book was something like a revelation. In workmanship he reminds the reader of Dickens, but his surroundings were wholly novel, and as delightful as they were strange. He bewitched the whole reading world with 'The Luck of Roaring Camp,' and 'The Outcasts of Poker Flat,' and ever since those days he

has gone on with a tireless vivacity, telling the same stories over and over again, showing us the same scenes and the same people with an apparent unconsciousness of the fact of repetition which is truly astonishing. The roads of dusty red and the scented pine groves come back in story after story, and Colonel Starbottle and Jack Folinsbee look like immortals. The vagabond with the melodious voice who did something virtuous and went away warbling into the night is alive in new as in old pages, in defiance of fatigue. Preternaturally murderous gamblers with a Quixotic eye to the point of honour, saintly blackguards with superhuman splendours of affection and loyalty revealed in the final paragraph of their history, go on and on in his pages with changeless aspect. The oddest mixture of staleness and of freshness is to be found there. Since he first delighted us he has scarcely troubled himself once to find a new story, or a new type of character, or a new field for his descriptive powers. He took the Spanish mission into his stock-in-trade,

and he has since made that as hackneyed as the rest. And yet there remains this peculiarity about him—his latest stories are pretty nearly as good as his first. It would seem as if his interest had not flagged, as if the early impressions which impelled him to write were still clear and urgent in his mind. He is amongst the most singular of modern literary phenomena. The zest with which he has told the same tale for so many years sets him apart. It is as if until the age, say, of thirty he had been gifted with a brilliant faculty of observation, and had then suddenly ceased to observe at all. There seems to have come a time when his musical box would hold no more tunes, and ever since then he has gone on repeating the old ones. The oddness is not so much in the repetition as in the air of enjoyment and spontaneity worn by the grinder. *He* at least is not fatigued, and to readers who live from hand to mouth, and have no memories, there is no reason why he should ever grow fatiguing.

Mr. Henry James is a gentleman who has taken a little more culture than is good

for the fibre of his character. He is certainly a man of many attainments and of very considerable native faculty, but he staggers under the weight of his own excellences. The weakness is common enough in itself, but it is not common in combination with such powers as Mr. James possesses. He is vastly the superior of the common run of men, but he makes his own knowledge of that fact too clear. It is a little difficult to see why so worshipful a person should take the trouble to write at all, but it is open to the reader to conjecture that he would not be at so much pains unless he were pushed by a compulsory sense of his own high merits. He feels that it would be a shame if such a man should be wasted. I cannot say that I have ever received from him any supreme enlightenment as to the workings of that complex organ, the human heart, but I understand quite definitely that Mr. James knows all about it, and could show many things if he were only interested enough to make an effort. He is the apostle of a well-bred boredom. He knows all about

society, and *bric-à-brac*, and pictures, and music, and natural landscape, and foreign cities, and if he could feel a spice of interest in any earthly thing he could be charming. But his listless, easy air—of gentlemanly-giftedness fatigued—provokes and bores. He is like a man who suppresses a yawn to tell a story. He is a blend of genuine power and native priggery, and his faults are the more annoying because of the virtues they obscure and spoil. He is big enough to know better.

It is likely enough that to Mr. James the fact of having been bred in the United States has proved a disadvantage. To the robuster type of man of letters, to the Dickens or Kipling kind of man, it would be impossible to wish better luck than to be born into that bubbling pot-full of things. But Mr. James's over-accentuated refinement of mind has received the very impetus of which it stood least in need. He has grown into a humorous disdain of vulgar emotions, partly because he found them so rich about him. The figures which Bret Harte sees through

a haze of romance are to him essentially coarse. The thought of Mr. James in association with Tennessee and Partner over a board supplied with hog, flapjack and forty-rod awakes a bewildering pity in the mind. An hour of Colonel Starbottle would soil him for a week. He is not made for such contact. It is both curious and instructive to notice how the too-cultured sensitiveness of a man of genius has blinded him to the greatest truth in the human life about him. Born into the one country where romance is still a constant factor in the lives of men, he conceives romance to be dead. With stories worthy of a great writer's handling transacting themselves on every hand, he is the first elucidator of the principle that a story-teller's business is to have no story. The vision of the sheet which was let down from Heaven to Peter was seen in vain so far as he is concerned, but the story of that dream holds an eternal truth for the real artist. Mr. James is not the only man whose best-nursed and most valued part has proved to be destructive. With a little more strength he might

have kept all his delicacies, and have been a man to thank God for. As it is, he is the victim of an intellectual foppery.

Mr. W. D. Howells has something in common with Mr. James, but he is of stronger stuff—not less essentially a gentleman, as his books reveal him, but more essentially a man. He has a sterling courage, and has never been afraid of his own opinions. His declaration that 'all the stories have been told' is one of the keys to his method as a novelist. A work of fiction is something which enables him to show the impingement of character on character, with modifying effects of environment and circumstance. His style is clean and sober, and his method is invariably dignified. He has deliberately allowed his critical prepossessions to exclude him from all chance of greatness, but within his self-set limits he moves with a certain serene mastery, and his detail is finely accurate.

Miss Mary Wilkins, who is a very much younger writer than any of the three here dealt with, reminds an English reader both of George Eliot and Miss Mitford. 'Pem-

broke' is the best and completest of her books. So far as pure literary charm goes it would be difficult to amend her work, but the suggestion of character conveyed is surely too acidulated. Such a set of stubborn, self-willed, and uncomfortable people as are gathered together in these pages could hardly have lived in any single village in any quarter of the world. They are drawn with an air of truth which is not easy to resist, but if they are really as accurately studied as they seem to be Pembroke must be a place to fly from. It is conceivable that the members of such a congregation might be less intolerable to each other than they seem to the foreign outsider, but the ameliorating effects of usage must needs be strong indeed to make them fit to live with. For the most part they are represented as well-meaning folk; but they are exasperatingly individual, all over sore corners, eager to be injured at their tenderest points, and implacable to the person who hurts them. In Pembroke a soreness of egotism afflicts everybody. Every creature in the book is over-sensitive

to slight and misunderstanding, and every creature is clumsy and careless in the infliction of pain. It is a study in self-centred egotism. People who have an opportunity of knowing village life in the Eastern States proclaim the book a masterpiece of observation.

Bret Harte, studying a form of life now extinct, which once (with certain allowances made for the romantic tendency) flourished in the West; Mr. Howells, taking micrographic studies of present-day life in the great centre of American culture; Mr. James, with a clever, weary *persiflage* skimming the face of society in refined cosmopolitan circles; and Miss Wilkins, observing the bitter humours of the Eastern yokel, are none of them distinctively American either in feeling or expression. Mr. Samuel L. Clemens—otherwise Mark Twain—stands in striking contrast to them all. He is not an artist in the sense in which the others are artists, but he is beyond compare the most distinct and individual of contemporary American writers. He started as a mere

professional fun-maker, and he has not done with fun-making even yet, but he has developed in the course of years into a rough and ready philosopher, and he has written two books which are in their own way unique. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are the two best boys in the whole wide range of fiction, the most natural, genuine, and convincing. They belong to their own soil, and could have been born and bred nowhere else, but they are no truer locally than universally. Mark Twain can be eloquent when the fancy takes him, but the medium he employs is the simplest and plainest American English. He thinks like an American, feels like an American, is American blood and bones, heart and head. He is not the exponent of culture, but more than any man of his own day, excepting Walt Whitman, he expresses the sterling, fearless, manly side of a great democracy. Taking it in the main, it is admirable, and even lovable, as he displays it. It has no reverence for things which in themselves are not reverend, and since its point of view is not one from which all things

are visible it seems occasionally overbold and crude ; but the creed it expresses is manly, and clean, and wholesome, and the man who lives by it is a man to be admired. The point of view may be higher in course of time, and the observer's horizon widened. The limitations of the mind which adopts the present standpoint may be found in 'A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur.' Apart from its ethics, the book is a mistake, for a jest which could have been elaborated to tedium in a score of pages is stretched to spread through a bulky volume, and snaps into pieces under that tension.

The great war of North and South has been answerable for more fiction than any other campaign of any age, and it has quite recently furnished reason for the novel, 'The Red Badge of Courage,' by Mr. Stephen Crane, which is out of counting the truest picture of the sort the world has seen. It seemed at first impossible to believe that it had been written by any but a veteran. It turns out that the author is quite a young man, and that he gathered everything by

reading and by hearsay. Here again the method is national and characteristic. After all these years of natural submission to British influence American writers are growing racy of their own soil.

XIII

THE YOUNG ROMANCERS

In the combined spelling and reading book which was in use in schools more than forty years ago there was printed a story to the following effect:—Certain Arabs had lost a camel, and in the course of their wanderings in search of him they met a dervish, whom they questioned. The dervish answered by offering questions on his own side. 'Was your camel lame in one foot?' he began. 'Yes,' said the owners. 'Was he blind in one eye?' he continued. 'Yes,' said the owners again. 'Had he lost a front tooth?' 'Yes.' 'Was he laden with corn on one side and with honey on the other?' 'Yes, yes, yes. This is our camel. Where have you seen him?' The dervish answered: 'I have never seen him.' The Arabs, not without apparent reason, suspected the dervish of

playing with them, and were about to chastise him, when the holy man asked for a hearing. Having secured it, he explained. He had seen the track of the camel. He had known the animal to be lame of one foot because that foot left a slighter impression than the others upon the dust of the road. He had argued it blind of one eye because it had cropped the herbage on one side of the road alone. He knew it to have lost a tooth because of the gap left in the centre of its bite. Bees and flies argued honey on one side of the beast, and ants carrying wheat grains argued wheat on the other. The name of this observant and synthetic-minded dervish was not Sherlock Holmes, but he had the method of that famous detective, and in a sense anticipated the plots of all the stories which Dr. Conan Doyle has so effectively related of him. Possibly the best stories in the world which depend for their interest on this kind of induction are Edgar Allan Poe's. 'The Gold Bug,' 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Stolen Letter' have not been surpassed or even equalled by

any later writer; but Dr. Doyle comes in an excellent second, and if he has not actually rivalled Poe in the construction and development of any single story, he has run him close even there, and has beaten him in the sustained ingenuity of continuous invention. The story of 'The Speckled Band' has a flavour almost as gruesome and terrible as Poe's 'Black Cat,' and an unusual faculty for dramatic narrative is displayed throughout the whole clever series. The Sherlock Holmes stories are far, indeed, from being Dr. Doyle's best work, but it is to them that he mainly owes his popularity. They took the imaginative side of the general reader, and their popular properties are likely to keep them before the public mind for a long while to come. To estimate Dr. Doyle's position as a writer one has to meet him in 'The Refugees,' in 'The White Company,' and in 'Rodney Stone.' In each of these there is evident a sound and painstaking method of research, as well as a power of dramatic invention; and in combination with these is a style of unaffected manliness, sim-

plicity, and strength, which is at once satisfactory to the student and attractive to the mass of people who are content to be pleased by such qualities without knowing or asking why. The labour bestowed on 'The White Company' may very well be compared to that expended by Charles Reade on 'The Cloister and the Hearth.' It covers a far less extent of ground than that monumental romance, and it has not (and does not aim at) its universality of mood, but the same desire of accuracy, the same order of scholarship, the same industry, the same sense of scrupulous honour in matters of ascertainable fact, are to be noted, and being noted, are worthy of unstinted admiration. It is, perhaps, an open question as to whether Dr. Doyle, in his latest book, has not run a little ahead of the time at which a story on such a theme could be written with entire safety. 'Rodney Stone' is a story of the prize-ring, and of the gambling, hard-drinking, and somewhat brutalised days in which that institution flourished. There are many of us (I have made public confession half a score of times)

who regret the abolition of the ring, on grounds of public policy. We argue that man is a fighting animal, and that in the days of the ring there was a recognised code of rules which regulated his conduct at times when the combative instinct was not to be restrained. We observe that our commonalty now use the knife in quarrel, and we regret the death of that rough principle of honour which once imposed itself upon the worst of rowdies. But there is little doubt that the feeling of the community at large is overwhelmingly against us, and it is for this reason that I am dubious as to the success of Dr. Doyle's last literary venture. The makings of romance are in the story, and are well used. There are episodes of excellent excitement in it; notable amongst these being the race on the Godstone Road, which is done with a swing and passion not easy to overpraise. In the narrative of the fight and of the incidents which preceded it the feeling of the time is admirably preserved, and the interest of the reader is held at an unyielding tension. But the prize-ring is a little too

near as yet to offer unimpeachable matter for romance; and people who can read of the bloodthirsty Umslopogaas and his semi-comic holocausts with an unshaken stomach, or feel a placid historic pleasure in the chronicles of Nero's eccentricities, will find 'Rodney Stone' objectionable because it chronicles a 'knuckle fight,' and because a 'knuckle fight' is still occasionally brought off in London, and more occasionally suppressed by the police.

But a more serious criticism awaits Dr. Conan Doyle's last work. It is offered respectfully, and with every admiration for the high qualities already noticed. In the re-embodiment of a bygone age in fiction, three separate and special faculties are to be exercised. The first is the faculty for research, which must expend its energy not merely on the theme in hand, but on the age at large. The second is the imaginative and sympathetic faculty, which alone can make the dry bones of social history live again. The third is the faculty of self-repression, the power to cast away all which, however laboriously acquired, is

dramatically unessential. Two of these powers belong in generous measure to Dr. Conan Doyle. The third, which is as necessary to complete success, he has not yet displayed. In 'Rodney Stone' an attempt has been made to cover up this shortcoming, in the form in which the story has been cast, and in the very choice of its title. But when the book comes to be read it is not the tale of Rodney Stone (who is a mere outsider privileged to narrate), but of his fashionable uncle's combat with Sir Lothian Hume, with the ring in which their separate champions appear as a battle ground. Many pages are crowded with people who are named in passing and forgotten. They have no influence on the narrative, and no place in it. Their presence assuredly displays a knowledge of the time and its chronicles, but they are just so many obstacles to the clear run of the story, and no more. This is the chief fault to be found with the book, but it is a grave fault, and the writer, if he is to take the place which his powers and his industry alike join in claiming

for him, must learn to cast 'as rubbish to the void' many a painfully acquired bit of knowledge. To be an antiquary is one thing, and to be an antiquarian romancer is another. Dr. Doyle has aimed at being both one and the other in the same pages. A true analogy may be taken from the stage, where the supernumeraries are not allowed to obscure the leading lady and gentleman at any moment of action.

Mr. Stanley Weyman, who is not Dr. Doyle's equal in other matters, is in this sole respect his master. He keeps his hero on the scene, and his action in full swing. He gives no indication of a profound or studious knowledge of his time, but he knows it fairly well. Mr. Doyle's method is at bottom the truer, when once the detailed labour is hidden, but when it bares its own machinery it loses most of its gain. Mr. Weyman tells a rattling story in rattling fashion. His is the good old style of easy-going romance, where courage and adventure never fail. He has chosen the realm of D'Artagnan and Aramis, of

Porthos and Athos, and he has plenty of vivacity, and can invent brilliantly on the lines on which the brave Dumas invented long before him. He is a cheerful and inspiriting echo. He cannot wind the mighty horn the elders sounded, but he can imitate it fairly from a distance. It is only when that crass reviewer comes along to tell us that the old original hunter of romance is back again that his music gives us anything but pleasure. For my own part, I hope he may flourish long, and give us stories as good as 'A Gentleman of France' as often as he can. My 'Bravo!' shall be as ready as any man's and as hearty. Why —to change the simile used just now— when a man is resting his legs in a comfortable *auberge*, and drinking the honest light wine of the country (which doesn't pretend to be better than it is), should the asinine enthusiast come to spoil his enjoyment by swearing that he sits in the enchanted palace of Sir Walter, and has before him the mighty wine Sir Walter bottled? The enthusiast provokes to wrath. It's a

very good *auberge*—it's a capital, comfortable house of call, and we should like to sit there often. And the wine—we found no fault with the wine. It's an honest tap, and a wholesome and a palatable, and here's the landlord's health in it. But the magic vintage? Rubbish!

Mr. Anthony Hope has been so lucky as to please the public in two styles. In the one *genre* he has displayed an undoubted capacity, marred here and there to some tastes by a not very defined seeming of superciliousness, and in the other he has taken us into the most agreeable regions of unrestrained romance in which English readers have had leave to wander this many a day. He has caught the very tone of simple-hearted sincerity in which his later stories demand to be told. As an example of the adaptation of literary method to the exigencies of narrative it would not be easy to light on anything better. It is a little surprising that the trivial story and the trivial style of 'Mr. De Witt's Widow' should have come from the hand which

gave us the histories of the Princess Osra, and created the Kingdom of Ruritania. The one kind of work is clever, and smart, and knowingly—rather pretentiously—man-of-the-worldish. The other is large and simple, sweet and credulous. Mr. Hope, from his latest pages, has breathed on a tired and jaded time the breath of a pure and harmless fancy, and has earned its thanks for that benefaction.

It has been seen that the art of fiction as practised at this hour includes almost all known forms of romance, and that no school may be said to have its own way to the exclusion of another. It has been seen, too, that though this is not a day of pre-eminent greatness, we can boast an astonishing industry and fertility. The output of literary work has never been so large, nor has the average of excellence ever been so equal or so high. It has been demonstrated —it is being demonstrated in new instances two or three times a year—that literary talent is not at all the uncommon and half-miraculous thing it was once supposed to be.

Genius is as rare as ever, and is likely to continue so, but talent multiplies its appearances in full accordance with economic rules. No age ever submitted so constantly as ours to be amused or soothed by the romancer's art. The permission has opened the door to a great number of capable, industrious, and workmanlike men and women, who have learnt their business of amusement well. To the vast majority of us literature is as much a trade as any of the accepted businesses of Holborn or Cheapside, and, apart from a lingering sentimentalism, there is no reason why the fact should not be owned. There is no shame in honest craftwork done for hire, and when the work is so excellent as at least a score of living English writers can make it, we have a right to take some pride in it. But with this day's newspaper before me I learn that Mr. ——, who is the thin mimic of a fine imitator, has surpassed his last 'masterpiece,' and that a lady of name to me unknown has 'rivalled' his masterpiece, and that a gentleman to me unknown has produced a book which must necessarily

be a 'classic.' A masterpiece is a rare thing, and words have a definite meaning. We call 'Vanity Fair' and 'Esmond' masterpieces, when we desire to be enthusiastic. We call 'David Copperfield' a masterpiece, and we find plenty of people to dispute the judgment. A masterpiece is the master work of a master hand. It must needs be a rare thing. It is not for the dignity of our work that it should be greeted by that sort of hysteric hiccoughing against which these pages have protested. It is a shameless insult to letters at large when the hysteria is bought and paid for, as does sometimes happen, and not less insulting when the gentleman who grinds the axe is fee'd in kind by the other gentleman who rolls the log.

And now, what is done is done, and I leave my task with some misgiving. If here and there I have given pain, I have not written a word in malice. The pleasantest part of my work has lain in the fact that with every desire to be honest I have so often been compelled to praise.

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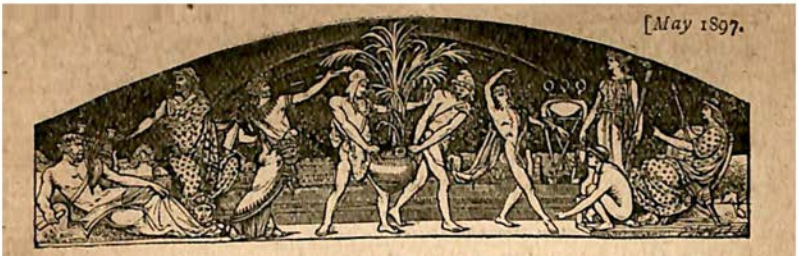

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